

## Don't Let Employee Attendance Issues Ruin Your Holiday Season

As the upcoming holiday season quickly approaches, our thoughts turn to turkey dinners, hot chocolate by the fireside, carolers on the street, and ornamented trees. Of course, we are also reminded of all our upcoming responsibilities: cooking a fifteen pound turkey for the in-laws, buying gifts for the kids, making travel arrangements, hanging decorations, attending numerous holiday parties, etc. The to-do list seems more daunting each year, and at a time when the sky grows dark before the work day is over, it feels like there isn't enough time to do everything we need to do.

Unfortunately for businesses, work is often the furthest thing from an employee's mind during this time of year. Employees may decide to miss partial or full days of work to take care of the items on their holiday to-do lists. A new CareerBuilder survey<sup>1</sup> found thirty-three percent of employers report that workers call in sick more often during the winter holidays. While the cold and flu season contributes to this number, so does the desire to skip work. In fact, the survey found that twenty-nine percent of workers admitted to already playing hooky from the office this year, citing errands and plans with family and friends among the top reasons for calling in sick when they were well. Although it's natural for people to want to fit these tasks in during the workday, that does not mean that the company should suffer as a result. Companies are still in the business of making profits, even during the holidays, and unscheduled absences negatively impact the company's productivity and ultimately hurt its bottom line. Here are some tips for what companies can do to get ahead of the curve on attendance issues during the holiday season and the rest of the year:

### **Create A Clear Absence Policy**

The first step in curbing abuse is to have leave and absence policies that clearly set forth when employees are entitled to leave and how to request it, which absences are allowed, the reporting requirements and what behavior will subject the employee to discipline. Absenteeism problems can range from employees not calling in or not showing up for their shifts, taking sick leave when well, and exhausting their available leave every month, to requesting extra time off and establishing patterns of abuse.



### **Communicate the Policy**

A company should establish clear expectations of its employees. A company's policy should be clearly written and disseminated to all employees through handbooks, intranets, and other written forms and should also be verbalized in team and department meetings. As the holidays approach, it would be prudent for companies to reiterate their absence policies to their employees.

### **Enforce the Policy Consistently and Fairly**

Companies can, and should, discipline their employees for any unexcused absences or attendance policy violations. Enforcement, however, must be consistent and fair. It is, therefore, critical to train supervisors and managers on managing absenteeism, conducting effective return-to-work interviews, and using disciplinary procedures when necessary. This is important to avoid morale issues and possible claims of discriminatory treatment.

<sup>1</sup> The nationwide survey was conducted by Harris Interactive from August 16 to September 8, 2011 and included more than 2,600 employers and 4,300 workers.

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## Conduct Return-to-Work Interviews

When an employee returns from an unscheduled absence, ensure that they have a return-to-work interview, which can be useful in identifying absence problems at an early stage. During the interview, you should identify the cause of the absence, determine if the employee is well enough to be at work, inform the employee of any documentation the company may require from him or her regarding the absence, update the employee on news or activities that they missed, and explain any expectations the company may have concerning the employee moving forward. Supervisors and managers should not accept incomplete or ambiguous excuses and should use the interview to press for sufficient details about an employee's absence. This is a simple but effective tool and may make employees think twice before abusing the company's absence policy.

## Provide Incentives for Attendance

To reduce absenteeism and increase corporate productivity, employers should consider implementing attendance incentive programs. These use various inducements to

provide employees with additional motives to come to work and may include cash bonuses, public recognition, in-kind prizes, extra time off or other enticements. Many organizations effectively use perfect attendance bonuses or set targets as an incentive to reduce absence levels.

## Offering Flexibility

Although enforcing the company's attendance policy is essential, it is also important to let employees know the company understands they have responsibilities outside of work. Company's should, therefore, consider offering employees more flexibility in their work schedules around the holidays or, perhaps, offer a few hours of special holiday paid time off to go gift shopping or perform other holiday errands. Remember, planned absences are always easier for a business to manage than unscheduled absences.

It is inevitable that as the holidays approach, employee absences will increase. By following the above guidelines, however, companies can help reduce these absences and, in doing so, avoid unnecessary costs and maintain productivity.

*The foregoing provides an overview of certain legal issues. It is not intended, and cannot be construed, as legal advice for any purpose.*

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