

Chronically Absent Employees – When to Call in Help

Work absences have been steadily increasing over the years. This is due to several factors. More people with young children or aging parents are in the job market, the workforce is getting older, and mental illness has become a leading cause of disability.

Regardless of the reason, studies show absenteeism is on the rise. The average rate of absence for a Canadian full-time worker due to illness or disability was 8.1 days in 2007, according to Statistics Canada. That is up from 7.6 days in 2006. The bottom line - employee illness and disability are costing Canadian employers billions of dollars every year.

Absenteeism, which is generally defined as absences that are unplanned, falls into two categories – innocent and culpable. Innocent absenteeism involves anything that an employee does not have control over, such as an illness. Culpable absenteeism is related to absences that the employee can control. Examples are being late for work, leaving early, or taking advantage of generous sick and family-related leave benefits because they feel "entitled" to a certain number of days off.

Employers and managers will be better able to manage absenteeism if they:

- 1) have clear guidelines/procedures related to absenteeism;
- 2) clearly communicate these guidelines/procedures to all employees and managers, and;
- 3) ensure these are carried out consistently across the organization.

In cases of culpable absenteeism, managers can follow normal disciplinary action and, if necessary, terminate employment.

With cases of innocent absenteeism, it's important to note that this may be protected by the Human Rights Code. In Ontario, the Code prohibits employment discrimination based on age, disability including chronic physical, mental and emotional impairments, family status such as a parent-child relationship, and marital status including traditional and common-law relationships (This is not an exhaustive list. Please refer to the Human Rights Code for further details).

Calling in Help

Following repetitive or chronic absenteeism, the manager should discuss the issue with the employee and refer to a third party for assessment and determination whether the absences are medically supported. If the absences are medically supported, health and disability specialists, such as Cowan, can intervene early to minimize the human resource and financial impact of disability in the workplace. Early intervention encompasses both occupational (workers' compensation) and non-occupational illnesses or injuries.

We recognize that these situations can sometimes become emotionally charged, and we have found that employers and employees often find it helpful to have a neutral party involved in the process.

It can be beneficial to have a third-party administrator manage the details, such as helping to set up doctor's appointments in a timely manner, and maintaining contact with the employee during the process. This also eliminates privacy concerns for the employee.

In addition, Cowan can help with:

- Prevention and Wellness Programs
- Sick-Leave/Short-Term Disability Adjudication
- Transitional Work Programs
- Long-Term Disability Adjudication
- Policy and Procedure Development
- Workers' Compensation Management

If it is determined that the innocent absenteeism is not medically supported, the manager should work collaboratively with the Human Resources department to devise a strategic management plan for each case.

Absences can be frustrating to employers and co-workers, who have to increase their productivity to handle the workload. It's extremely important, however, that the situation is handled professionally, and in a timely manner.

To find out how Cowan can help, please contact your Cowan consultant or Health and Disability Manager Susan Novo at 1-888-509-7797 ext. 274 or by email at susan.novo@cowangroup.ca.