



ABSENCE MANAGEMENT: WHY IT MAKES PRACTICAL SENSE FOR THE CARE INDUSTRY

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Part of the **ELAS** group of companies





Introduction

Absences are a fact of life for many businesses. Whether staff take time off for a brief illness or are on long-term sick leave, absence can take its toll on any company. This doesn't, however, mean that steps cannot be taken to limit its impact.

The cost of absence for the nation's businesses cannot be understated. Not only is there lost productivity to consider, but also the effect on staff morale and of course, profits.

In this white paper, *Absence management: Why it makes practical sense for the care industry*, we take a closer look at the issue of absence management and the proactive steps employers should be taking to minimise its impact, and especially those in the care sector.

HOW BIG A PROBLEM IS WORKPLACE ABSENCE?

The financial repercussions of absences in UK workplaces is considerable. A report from the CIPD suggests the median annual cost of absence stands at £522 for each employee, although this varies from sector to sector.

In the care industry, the report identifies that 11.3 days per year are lost per employee, which equates to 5% of all working time.

The financial cost of absence is only part of the picture. One of the biggest problems for businesses of any kind is the impact on productivity. A survey from [Vitality](#) shows that productivity loss is a growing issue; 23 days of productive time were lost in UK workplaces in 2014, increasing to 35.6 days in 2018.

Absenteeism is a big problem, but presenteeism is also a growing issue. This occurs when employees turn up for work when they are not fit to do so, either through physical or mental ill health, which also adversely affects productivity.

The [Vitality](#) survey revealed that UK employers typically lose out on 13.6% of working hours, with 12.5% of this total owed to presenteeism. Only 1.2% of these lost hours are actually linked to absence.



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ABSENCE MANAGEMENT AND THE CARE SECTOR

Why is absence management so important to the care industry?

Absence management is an issue that affects all sectors. However, one of the areas where it is felt most is the care industry, not least because businesses rely on the continued presence of staff to be able to provide a suitable level of care.

In many cases, the care industry is different from many others. So-called zero-hours contracts are rife in the sector, namely those where an employer is not required to guarantee a worker a minimum number of hours. One study from [Skills for Care](#) indicates that as many as a quarter of those working in adult social care are on zero-hours contracts.

Another issue facing the sector is high staff turnover. A report from the [National Audit Office](#) and Department of Health and Social Care revealed that the turnover rate among adult social care workers has been steadily increasing over recent years; in 2016-17, the vacancy rate in the sector stood at 6.6% - considerably higher than the national average of 2.5 to 2.7%.

As the report points out, there will be a growing need for care services as the UK's demographics continue to change. However, against the backdrop of limited funding and an ageing population, this isn't going to be an easy task.

What will happen if absence isn't addressed in the care sector?

Absence is so widely felt in the care industry that it can have a far-reaching impact on every area.

Care facilities have a legal requirement to have a sufficient ratio of workers to service users; regular absences make it difficult for them to achieve this balance. In most instances, they have to resort to using agency staff, which often comes as an added expense that many budgets cannot cope with.

A [government](#) study recently outlined that there is a growing funding gap for adult social care. The Local Government Association estimated the gap could stand at as much as £2.2 billion by 2019-20, making it more important than ever for budgets not to be put under undue pressure.

The reliability of staff is one of the factors that can help reduce the impact of funding instability. Agency staff come at a premium, while existing workers who are drafted in to fulfil the duties of their absent colleagues often demand a premium for their last-minute availability.

In some instances, it is not as easy as one person stepping in to cover a role of another. Care often involves certain specialisms that may not easily be taken up by another worker - something else that needs to be considered when taking steps to limit absences.

Morale is also worth thinking about. Workers who are constantly filling in for their colleagues are likely to carry some resentment, which can have an impact on overall workplace sentiment.

SICKNESS ABSENCE: EMPLOYEE RIGHTS



Before tackling sickness absence, employers need to be aware of exactly what their workers are entitled to. Employees are, of course, legally allowed to take time off work if they are unwell - they will only need to offer proof if they have been ill for more than seven days.

Self-certification may be required for absences of seven days or less. How this is achieved will be determined by the employer; in many cases, the worker will be asked to fill in a form or submit details of their absence using another method.

Workers on zero-hours contracts are entitled to basic statutory rights.

As with other employees, they must meet certain criteria in order to receive [Statutory Sick Pay](#):

- Work with the employer must have already started
- The employee must have been sick for 4 full days or more in a row (which includes non-working days)
- They must earn on average at least £118 per week (pre-tax)

Individuals on zero-hours contracts need to request sick pay from their employer. If this request is refused, it is within the worker's rights to ask for an explanation.

SICKNESS ABSENCE: AN EMPLOYERS PERSPECTIVE

While absence is something any manager can expect from time to time, it becomes quite a different issue when it starts to have a pervasive impact on a business.

Figures from the 2017 [Britain's Healthiest Workplace](#) survey show productivity loss due to mental and physical health issues costs the UK economy £77.5 billion per year. Not only this, employees lose as much as six working weeks of productive time each year.

There is undoubtedly potential for absence to have an adverse effect on companies of all sizes, but employers need to be tactful - and legal - in how they approach the issue with their staff.

Keeping on the right side of the law

Employers need to be aware of the Equality Act 2010 when addressing staff absence. Time taken off work for disabilities or pregnancy, for example, must be treated differently to repeated and unexplained absences.

In addition, the Employment Rights Act 1996 affords additional protection for employees for certain absences. It is important to correctly categorise absence in order to ensure compliance with employment legislation, while avoiding the risk of discrimination and automatically unfair dismissals.

Employers must also comply with the ACAS Codes of Practice when taking any action or undertaking a process when tackling absences.

Communicating workplace policies

Absence policies should be made clear to all employees on the first day of their employment. There are many different ways in which managers can communicate absence policies, including traditional methods such as including the policy in employees' induction packs and presenting it on notice boards throughout the workplace.

One of the biggest issues is that there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all approach to absence. While every workplace might have a policy in place outlining what it considers to be an acceptable level of absence, this may need to be adapted in certain scenarios.

The key is to maintain consistency across a business, regardless of its size or sector. This means ensuring all managers and supervisors have been trained and are aware of the specifics of absence management policies.

Companies should make sure they put everything that is in their absence policy into practice, such as return to work discussions. This is something that is often missed, so managers and employers need to lead by example in order for their absence policy to be efficiently communicated.

The role of return to work interviews

Return to work interviews can be a valuable tool in tackling frequent absence. They are an opportunity for an employee to outline why they were absent, and for employers to put whatever steps in place they can to make the return to work as easy as possible.

There might be instances where an employee repeatedly needs time off for hospital appointments. In this situation, it would not be appropriate for an employer to question them about their attendance record. Unjustified reasons for absence, on the other hand, can be dealt with at first by a line manager, before being referred to a HR department or similar.

Reasons to open communication

Employers should achieve a delicate balance between keeping in touch with workers who are absent, while not being over-intrusive. It is prudent to maintain records of all conversations and correspondence with the employee, especially in situations where repeated absence is becoming cause for concern.

The [Health and Safety Executive](#) recommends that any conversation with an employee needs to be focused on their wellbeing; efforts should also be made to emphasise what they will be able to do when they return to work. There should be a happy medium between making an employee feel they are being pressured into returning to work and ensuring they don't feel out of touch or undervalued through lack of communication.

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HOW TO TACKLE ABSENCE MANAGEMENT

Types of sickness management

Sickness management falls into two categories:

Absenteeism:

When a worker has regular absences

Medical Capability:

When a worker is absent in the long term

The first of these scenarios has the potential to cause widespread disruption to a business if it is not suitably monitored and controlled. This is why it is important to be diligent - and legal - when gathering evidence on sickness absence.

As with any legal scenario, it is essential that employers have evidence of consistent sickness absence if they are going to have any chance of addressing the problem. There are various tools that employers can use to gather the information they need.

“THE BRADFORD FACTOR IS DESIGNED IN SUCH A WAY THAT IT CAN IDENTIFY PATTERNS OF ABSENCE.”

The role of the Bradford Factor

Some workplaces use the Bradford Factor to determine the impact of employee absence on an organisation. It works on the principle that frequent, short absences are more disruptive to a company than prolonged absences.

The Bradford Factor is designed in such a way that it can identify patterns of absence. [ELAS Group](#) figures show January 3rd is the most common day for absences across the UK, followed by January 9th and 23rd in joint-second place. It identifies April as the healthiest month and suggests that Monday is the day of the week when most people call in sick.

Using the Bradford Factor can help businesses ascertain patterns such as this, and will give employers valuable data and information should they ever need to address sickness absence with an employee.



ATTENDANCE PRO

Highlight emerging trends before they become a problem

*Reduce absenteeism by up to 60%**

*Figure taken from absence reduction recorded during 2016-2017

INTRODUCING: ATTENDANCE PRO

The tools that businesses have at their disposal to monitor absence have become increasingly more reliable. Among them is Attendance Pro, a solution that has been developed by experts at the ELAS Group.

Attendance Pro has been formulated to help companies (including those in the care industry) reduce absence rates. It has been proven to lower staff absence by as much as 60% by tackling the root causes of absenteeism head on.

The system informs employers who is off sick, the reason for their absence and when they are expected to return to work. One of the main advantages for the care sector is that absence notifications are sent out to employers by

phone, email or text message - or all three, if preferred - so cover can be found sooner rather than later. This can be especially valuable in the care sector as it can reduce the reliance on agency staff.

Employers can download reports and use Attendance Pro to identify trends; this cuts down on administration tasks and keeps absences to a minimum. System users will also have access to two of the ELAS Group's other core offerings: its employment law service and occupational health service.



TAKE YOUR FIRST STEPS TOWARDS PROACTIVE ABSENCE MANAGEMENT

Whether your business operates in the care sector or any other industry, absence management has the potential to make a real difference to your organisation.

To find out more about Attendance Pro, call the ELAS Group on **08450 50 40 60** for a free consultation. We can talk you through the solution and demonstrate how it can help you be more proactive when it comes to managing staff absence.





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