Missing in Action

Address Absenteeism by Working with Employees

By Brian Justice

Absenteeism, or habitual absence (as from work), presents problems for every organization of every size. While rates vary across occupations and industries, the average rate in the United States is 3.1%.[1] In 2023, more than 17 million people worked in health care in all roles and at all levels.[2] So, on any given day, more than half a million of them are out unexpectedly.

Many health-related practices, clinics, laboratories, hospitals, and more are understaffed every day. The rhythm of those workplaces is disrupted, productivity slows, frustration builds, and patient care suffers.

And it's expensive! Recent statistics are unavailable, but the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that in 2015 absenteeism cost employers just short of $226 billion, or $1,685 per employee.[3] Those costs include overtime for those filling in, higher administrative costs, and lower revenue.

Other non-financial costs must be paid too. These include decreased morale, increased stress levels, patient complaints, and, most crucially of all, subpar care.[1]

Ultimately, to avoid issues for others (patients and coworkers), managers should work with employees to ensure they have the support and resources necessary to help them avoid absenteeism. Prevention via meaningful discussions about employees' causes for absenteeism and how it affects others can go a long way in creating a sustainable change.

Present Company Excluded

"Absenteeism has a trickle-down effect," says Michelle Gibbons, CMA (AAMA), a practice manager who supervises around 25 employees for Logan Health in Moore, Montana. "You end up with more staff burnout because one person is doing the work of two or three, perhaps missing steps. It's not intentional, of course. It's just having too much on their plate, and it can be difficult to get everything done."

Abby Thomas, CMA (AAMA), a workers' compensation representative in Milford, Indiana, agrees. "A huge part of working in health care is knowing you can count on your colleagues to be present and perform their tasks every day," she says. "Chronic absenteeism in any medical workplace affects team morale and patient care, which can lead to frustration that impacts the overall mood within the office, especially in environments that can include very stressful situations."

Contributing factors include the pervasive worker shortage. Adding to that is an even more alarming fact: approximately 75 million people[2] in the United States live in a health professional shortage area, defined as a geographic area, population, or facility with inadequate access to primary, dental, or mental health care providers.[4] That means absenteeism can have an even larger—and genuinely devastating—impact on people who are underserved to begin with.

Absent-Minded

"Every organization and individual practice should have a strong attendance policy that clearly defines expectations for both leaders and employees," says Kristi McCormick, vice president of operations for INTEGRIS Health Medical Group in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. "Conversations about attendance

Time to Talk

Early intervention is key to managing absenteeism effectively, says Jill Wilkins, CMA (AAMA). Addressing issues when they begin to develop helps managers prevent patterns from escalating into ongoing disruptions.

"It does us no good to avoid having the difficult conversation, as it just leads to further issues and gives the impression that the behavior is acceptable," she states. "Explain how [absenteeism] affects the team and the organization, have the conversation privately and respectfully, and collaborate on solutions that address their challenges, such as flexible hours or other accommodations."

Michelle Gibbons, CMA (AAMA), emphasizes the importance of creating a safe and private environment for these discussions. "Set aside time for a one-on-one, closed-door conversation," she says. "Try to understand their situation first, as we don't always know what challenges they're facing."

Managers must also balance that empathy with accountability. "It's easy to feel sympathy for an employee's situation, whether it's a late babysitter or car trouble, but not addressing the issue creates an environment in which tacit approval would seem to exist for disruptive behaviors," explains Kristi McCormick. "Future conversations will become only more difficult if the issue is ignored."

Ultimately, staying calm and objective while highlighting how absenteeism affects both the team and the organization is key.

"When employees realize their teammates are negatively affected, it often resonates more strongly," Wilkins notes. By fostering open communication and collaboration, managers can address absenteeism constructively and effectively.

should begin during the interview stage, with explanations about how unplanned call-ins impact everyone."

This approach is also advocated by Jill Wilkins, CMA (AAMA), director of clinic operations for UnityPoint Clinics in Johnston, Iowa. "Encourage open communication and foster an environment where employees feel comfortable discussing challenges they may be facing, whether personal or professional," she says. "Establish a foundation of trust. The more employees trust their leaders, the more open they will be in communicating any issues before they start causing problems."

Staff absenteeism may be caused by a combination of reasons[1]:

- Bullying or mental health
- Burnout
- Childcare or eldercare needs
- Disengagement (i.e., feeling disconnected from the organization's mission and subsequently lacking the motivation to work)
- Health issues like chronic conditions, seasonal illness, and medical appointments
- Low morale
- Poor mental health

Heather Lamb, a workplace well-being expert in Waldorf, Maryland, also advocates for other policies that can help drive absenteeism down. "Flexible work options, like sick days or personal days without penalty, can help create a work culture that values the employees' need for time off and doesn't make them feel guilty about it," she says. "Managers should also check in with employees on a regular basis to make sure they're not feeling overwhelmed or stressed. This can avert absenteeism before it grows into a larger concern."

Here to Stay

Addressing absenteeism effectively begins with immediate and constructive conversations between managers and employees.

"I think that leaders have the most success with curbing tardiness and absences when issues are immediately addressed," says McCormick. "The conversation doesn't have to be negative or punitive but should bring awareness to the employee about their role in the team's success."

Acknowledging improvement and progress helps too.

"Managers should want everyone to be successful in their role," she adds. "For example, saying, 'Beth, I know we discussed your tardiness last month, but your attendance has been perfect recently. Dr. Smith mentioned how smoothly her clinic has been running in the mornings, and she was even able to work in a couple of sick patients. I appreciate you!' "

Thomas underscores the deeper meaning of health care work: "A key quality to instill in all employees, regardless of job title, is that this work is not just a paycheck. Every patient you encounter is someone's loved one, friend, or family member."

Every patient must be cared for with the same level of respect and dedication that employees expect their own loved ones to experience. Simply showing up—literally!—has a deep and profound impact on the work environment, colleagues, and, most importantly, patients. ✦

References

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