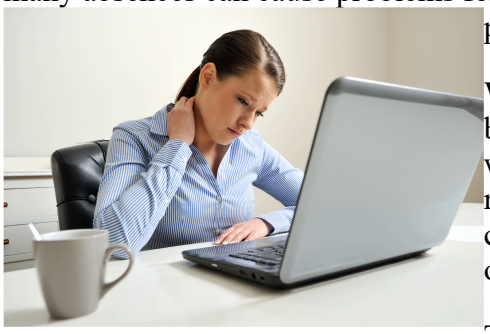
The boss’s dilemma: managing sick employees

Employees calling in sick are a fact of everyday business life – especially during cold and flu season. But too many absences can cause problems for organizations, especially smaller companies in which every employee plays a vital role and wears multiple hats.



While most of us prefer to tough out a cold, that’s not always good for business. More than half – 51 per cent – of Canadian workers come to work when they’re under the weather, according to a recent Accountemps survey. And when they arrive at the office, 57 per cent of other employees worry about being exposed to the illness, and only 11 per cent are impressed by their co-worker's dedication.

Then there are those employees who take every single sick day they’re entitled to – and often more – when they don’t necessarily need them. Some may feel they’re entitled to use their sick day allotment while others use sick days for other reasons, such as childcare issues. In these cases, co-workers often have to assume extra work to keep the department running smoothly, which eventually leads to resentment and lost productivity.

For managers, it can feel like walking a tightrope: encouraging some employees to take a sick day while discouraging others. But it *can* be done.

Discouraging heroes

Let those workers who stagger into work coughing and sneezing know that while you greatly appreciate their dedication, you prefer that they stay home and recuperate rather than get worse working. Emphasize that the organization can’t afford the entire department out sick because one person has spread a bad cold.

- **Send the sick person home.** No excuses.

- **Allow flexible work arrangements.** Allow people to work from home. It’s better to have them working sick from home than working sick at the office.
- **Stress good self-care.** If your organization is holding a free flu shot clinic, encourage your team to take advantage of it and allow time for them to do so. Otherwise, allow time off for your employees to get flu shots from their health care providers.
- **Lead by example.** When it comes to working sick, managers are often the worst offenders – either because of workload, meetings or expectations. Do not soldier through a cold. If you must continue working, do so from home and teleconference as needed. Your employees will appreciate your consideration in not spreading sickness, and will follow your lead.

Discouraging abuse

An employee who habitually exceeds their sick days allowance may not be intentionally trying to abuse the system. They may just need to understand that sick days are intended to help prevent loss of wages due to short-term personal injury or illness only. Therefore, when discussing what you feel are excessive absences, make sure your employees understand the following:

- That it is in their best interest to use sick days wisely because it’s important to have sufficient sick days available in case they experience a serious illness or injury.
- That their absences negatively affect operations and morale as well as their professional reputations and future career aspirations.
- That if they are dealing with a serious health condition or personal crisis, direct them to available resources, such as Human Resources or their Employee and Family Assistance Program.

Again, consider flexible work arrangements. These allow employees to continue working despite having to be at home because of childcare or other personal issues.

Things to consider

When reviewing an employee's history, a number of factors may indicate that sick days are being abused or that there are other concerns. Look for consistent patterns in when sick days are taken, including:

- on Mondays or Fridays
- on days before or after a holiday
- after a vacation request was denied
- when difficult assignments or projects are scheduled or due
- after discipline for a performance issue
- their supervisor is on vacation

Identifying patterns of behaviour can help you uncover hidden problems that could possibly affect productivity, such as job dissatisfaction, workplace conflicts and workload issues.

By setting clear expectations for all staff regarding sick leave, every member of your team will understand their rights and responsibilities in helping create and maintain a healthy and productive organization.