southeastern

We need to talk about absence

Unplanned absences will derail Southeastern, causing cancelled trains, incurring fines and damaging the company's reputation.

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Absence has a devastating impact upon rail companies. It's essential that London South Eastern gets it under control before it's too late.

Overview

Unexplained absence within London Southeastern is running at many days per employee per year – impacting the business in multiple ways. Customer service is diminished, trains are cancelled, and fines incurred. Putting additional pressure on those staff that are at work inevitably leads to unnecessary overtime or fatigue, which only encourages further absences. A viscous circle starts to turn.

Embracing more flexible working is one way around the problems. Indeed, this is set to rise as part of Southeastern's diversity mandate. However, this introduces complexities that existing spreadsheet-based processes are ill-equipped to handle.

What is needed is greater visibility of workforce absences and greater provision for employees to self-serve. This can only be achieved by automating core processes and by putting smarter tools in the hands of employees.

To simultaneously deliver operational improvements and greater employee engagement, it's important to understand the importance of absence control and how it's being dealt with in Southeastern.

This mini white paper answers the following questions:

- What is absence?
- Why is absence management important and why now?
- How can I get the most out of absence management?
- What benefits will I see as a result of improved absence management?

What is **absence?**

Employee absence is one of the most infuriating and harmful phenomena of the modern workplace. A degree of absence cannot be avoided as people get ill or are forced by personal circumstances not to attend work as intended.

It should be added that physical absence from the workplace might not always be important. In fact, in many roles and environments it's more important to be offsite, with customers and partners. In sales, for example, high levels of mobility are expected in many companies today, but the principle stands that knowing when employees are working and not working is critical to efficiency. And there is no excuse for compensatory measures not to be in place for when people are unable to work.

First though, it's important to emphasise that there are two very distinct forms of absence: planned and unplanned. Planned absence such as annual leave days or other forms of leave agreed in advance can be more easily dealt with, but both forms of absence can be managed better by using automation and best-practice processes.

Why is absence management important and why now?

High and unpredictable levels of absence are the menace of the modern workplace but they affect different roles in different ways. HR executives are at the heart of this challenge and the absence phenomenon is a major blocker to employee engagement. HR also faces tough record-keeping tasks to log absences that can be time-consuming if they involve paper-based processes, spreadsheets or other tools that are not fit for purpose. Old tools can also lead to version issues as files are emailed around or stored on file servers where it's easy for staff to work on old, irrelevant documents. To lower absence rates, HR has to automate processes to make it easier to log absences, implement wellbeing schemes and pay close attention to employee satisfaction levels.

But HR is far from being the only department affected. In finance the need to bring in costly cover or offer premium overtime hours for absence creates a challenge that is greater because of unpredictability. In operations, business process changes or decisions on the allocation of skills that need to be made can be complicated by lack of relevant or accurate data.

For legal counsel, unexpected absence can lead to health-and-safety risks and an inability to supply regulators and watchdogs with the data they require if systems are not adequate. Product and service executives can be severely impacted if just one or two employees are absent for a short time. Employees and their managers can be frustrated by the lack of tools for easily logging absences, making them less likely to record reasons and timings of absence. Here, poor user interfaces, ancient tools and no remote capabilities are all annoyances. And for IT, if modern tools such as cloud-based services are not sanctioned, IT can't deliver the sorts of actionable information that senior leaders require. All in all, getting to grips with the root causes of absence is clearly an enormously important task.

How can I get the most out of absence management?

The CIPD notes that despite its obvious impact too few organisations (just one-third) actively monitor and analyse employee absence costs while 12% don't collect data at all. By breaking the numbers down by roles, departments and other factors, it will be easier to see where challenges lie and to take appropriate action.

But firms must also look at the problem through a holistic lens. That means defining roles and setting realistic goals in order to create a workplace environment where employees are motivated to go to work and be highly productive. Flexible working schemes and recognising the importance of wellbeing will also help to prevent non-genuine reasons for absence, as will helping employees with genuine illnesses.

Leaders and line managers need to be able to see the triggers that are leading to absence issues and amend their working conditions accordingly. This need has seen the emergence of trends such as 'duvet days', offers of more annual leave days and encouraging staff to participate in setting their own goals, targets and bonus schemes.

Some examples on how to reduce high absence rates in your company:

- Monitor absence rates and analyse for trends and patterns
- Consider your use of flexible working schemes and whether they can be extended
- Ensure you have a policy for dealing with employees that have had long absences
- Examine your technology tools and processes: are they fit to purpose?

Some firms have provided incentives for attendance, but critics of the concept note that this can lead to 'presenteeism' where staff turn up for work even when unwell. Notably, 8% of respondents in the Group Risk Development survey believe their employee absence rates are lower because of presenteeism. Finally, it's important to be open and equal with no special dispensation given to some employees over others.

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What benefits will I see as a result of improved **absence management?**

An efficient absence management process will be rules-based so managers and administrators can set parameters such as the number of people who can be off at a particular time, in a particular role or department. This will lead to workflows and services that are fully compliant, efficient with central management, and provide full workforce visibility as well as support for data analysis. For example, it is not uncommon for unplanned absence to take place at the end of a working week, when the weather is good or when major sporting events are taking place.

An online self-service capability puts the onus and responsibility on users to request time-off and see status information from anywhere with a smartphone app. Creating rules and policies will reduce administrative chores to a minimum while a well-designed user interface will make it easier for employees to use systems.

For too long, absence management has been the 'elephant in the room' at workplaces. Causing massive inefficiencies and often indicative of broader problems, high levels of absence have rarely been considered as a major challenge for HR leaders. But in the modern world where locating, hiring and retaining talent is of increasing strategic importance, finding ways to have industry -leading levels of employee satisfaction, attendance and engagement is critical.

Solving the absence puzzle can't happen overnight, but a combination of an attractive workplace culture and the best processes and tools is the only way to go.

"We now have a much better understanding of our absence history and sickness is now running at less than 2%. Also, the holiday calendar is a great tool – for each department, we can see at a glance who is off at the same time, which helps us to plan proactively."

John Parry, Finance Director,
The Assay Office Birmingham

Want to find out more?

We have more information available on everything your business needs to know about absence. Take a look at our website **www.kronos.co.uk/absence** to read how other businesses use Kronos to get a grip on absence, or watch a video to learn more.

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