

ARE YOU PRESENT BUT ABSENT FROM WORK?

Absenteeism is costing the Irish economy €1.5 billion per annum, according to IBEC's Employee Absenteeism Report for 2011, but do we know the cost of presenteeism? Deirdre Cronnelly says it's time to recognise the new forms of presenteeism, raise awareness and proactively do something about them and so too does our government at a national level.

How many national reports are commissioned to understand the problem of presenteeism in the workplace? In fact, how much general understanding and recognition is there regarding presenteeism in our country?

Presenteeism does not even register as a correctly spelt word or offer an alternative in the Microsoft English dictionary spell check. Should our awareness and management of presenteeism change not just at an organisational level but indeed at an individual and national level too?

Presenteeism is a concept used to describe the phenomenon of working through illness and injury, which can in turn negatively impact on the job productivity amongst other factors. It doesn't fall into the absenteeism statistics nor does it fall neatly into the concept of employee engagement; a much bandied-about word in human resources.

Yet it is something which is significantly on the increase and something we need not only to raise general awareness around but indeed tackle on a national level. US studies from the Harvard Business Review suggest it is costing more than actual absenteeism.

PRESENTEE EMPLOYEES

Traditionally the characteristics associated with 'presentee' employees were backache and upper musculoskeletal disorder, migraine and allergies to name but a few. Weight-related problems have begun to surface also in recent times.

We are all familiar with those individuals who come into work but are not actually present in the sense they are not overly engaged in their work or as productive as they could be due to such factors.

They may want to be more engaged but due to a variety of these issues they find it difficult to do so. It is rare that an Employee Engagement Programme can reach such employees.

As the recession deepens so too does the problem of presenteeism. Whilst the main causes of presenteeism are still with us, additional

causes are emerging. In recent times given the economic downturn many employees are genuinely glad to have a job and will do whatever they can to hold on to it.

In fact, so much so that many of them may – regardless of their mental, physical or emotional state – come into work just to ensure they are seen at their desks. They do this to 'positively manage their profile' in the hope of minimising any potential negative implications on themselves should restructuring talks arise.

As a consequence the recession appears to have led to reduced levels of absenteeism from 3.38 percent to 2.58 per cent, according to this year's IBEC Employee Absenteeism Management Report. It is ironic, that the reduced absenteeism rate may have significantly increased presenteeism on the job or in other words loss of productivity.

FORMS OF PRESENTEEISM

What are the new emerging causes of presenteeism and why should we be concerned

at an organisational, individual and national level? The most prevalent and newest forms of presenteeism are evident to those of us with our fingers on the pulse of large organisations. Which of them do you recognise within your organisation?

Type 1: The Battler

We are all familiar with the individual who despite sneezing, coughing and runny nose decides to battle on and come into the office. They are obviously unwell and in danger of contaminating the rest of us as they sneeze and cough into their hankies. Commendable individuals but can they really work properly if they are feeling like that?

Would they not be better off flying low for a day and kicking it or bring their work home? How should we manage individuals such as these?

Should we and our organisations take a practical and individualised approach and encourage individuals to behave in a responsible



manner for their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of their colleagues not to mention the bottom line? What do you and your organisation do?

Type 2: The Few Too Many

Many of us may have been guilty of having that extra glass of wine on a school night and consequently not performing at peak level the next day. However, it is interesting to note that according to the Health Research Board's 2011 National Drug-Related Death Index that alcohol is involved in 40 per cent of all poisoning deaths in the last six-year period. As such it is the highest culprit of all deaths caused due to 'drugs'.

We do not need research statistics to tell us that the effects of alcohol are proving a grave problem for our society. It is all around us. People in times of stress, particularly economic stress, turn to alcohol as a form of release and to help them 'cope'.

Dr David Stuckler, sociology lecturer at King's College Cambridge and Yale health policy and economics graduate, was in Dublin in December 2011 to address a conference organised by equality think-tank, Tasc.

We do not need statistics to understand how a 'few too many' can be a significant cause of presenteeism. As individuals and our organisations, what do we do to address these issues?



His message was: "What happens in the economy matters for our health." He says that the more rapid the economic changes in a country, the bigger the impact on a nation's health.

"We found that those countries that implemented very rapid economic changes had greater rises in suicides, homicides, heart attacks and alcohol-related deaths," he says. These changes in society will naturally be manifested in our workplace. In such societies, Stuckler pointed out that increased consumption of alcohol and its negative side effects was common.

If our employees are fortunate enough to be working in a 'safe' organisation their spouses or extended family may not be. Consequently circumstances outside work from our wider society whether they be from a relationship or financial perspective may be affecting them so much so that they are turning to alcohol as a form of coping.

Again we do not need statistics to understand how a 'few too many' can be a significant cause of presenteeism. As individuals and our organisations, what do we do to address these issues?

Type 3: Negative Stress Head

Whilst stress can be a positive force, certain types can be negative and counterproductive. Stress induced by factors which appear outside our control, such as the economy or organisational change, may be one such form of



stress. We all have 'negative stress heads' in our working environment.

Some symptoms evident in cases of negative stress are an inability to concentrate, irritability and insomnia. The Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD) data from the Occupational Safety and Health Journal (November 2011) has shown for the first time that stress is the most common cause of sickness absence.

Amongst manual workers it is more prevalent than musculoskeletal conditions and amongst non-manual workers it is more prevalent than acute medical conditions.

However, due to the downturn how many employees still come into the office despite exhibiting these symptoms, instead of proactively dealing with them? As individuals and our organisations what do we do to help them proactively deal with this?

Type 4: Moody & Withdrawn

Are you familiar with this type in your organisation? He/she seems fine but maybe a bit withdrawn or moody over the last few months or unfortunately experiencing extended levels of stress. However, if not dealt with or managed correctly the causes may be pre-cursors to developing mental illness. It is on the increase in the country.

- 50 per cent of Irish people will experience mental health difficulties at least once in their lives (WHO).
- Five of the 10 leading causes of disability worldwide are due to mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression.
- By 2020 the WHO estimates that the global burden of mental health will be heavier than heart disease.

In Ireland it is a chronic problem and is

worsening as the recession deepens. The tragic permanent solution for sufferers of this temporary problem is suicide. In 2010, 486 people died by suicide in Ireland (2010 HEALTHplus).

We all know someone, if not within our own family circle, then within our organisation or wider community. This is the ultimate tragic impact of some forms of presenteeism not being managed properly in their early stages.

EMOTIONAL COSTS

So, what does presenteeism cost? Whilst the cost is no doubt financially significant for the organisation there is also a heavy emotional cost to be paid by us as individuals and as a nation.

This is a difficult cost to quantify. If we wish

to minimise and manage that cost, we all need to recognise the new forms of presenteeism, raise awareness and proactively do something about them as individuals, managers and organisations. And so too does our government at a national level.



STARTING AFRESH

Deirdre Cronnelly is director of AFRESH, a motivational wellbeing coaching company, which assists both individuals and organisations to take a fresh look at their personal and professional lives. For further information visit www.afresh.ie

