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Dealing with Absence Issues

Persistent short term absences

When an employee is frequently absent from work for short periods of time, this would be termed as persistent short term absence.

It is important to remember when dealing with any absence issue that the employee may have a genuine problem and may need additional support and is not necessarily a malingerer.

You may or may not have cause to question how genuine the absence is. In any event you are entitled to be concerned about the employee's **attendance record**.

Patterns of absence

Although you must treat each absence individually you may find that patterns do emerge.

For example research has shown that;

- Young people tend to have more frequent short term absence
- Unauthorised absence is more common among new starters; longer serving team members get to know the Company's standards and expectations and tend to stay within the framework
- Absence tends to increase where there are high levels of overtime or frequently rotating shift patterns
- Absence is likely to be greater in large teams

Unacceptable Attendance Record

It is impossible to legislate what should be considered as an unacceptable attendance record.

However as a guide, a record of more than 4 occasions in any 12 month rolling period should be looked at carefully and/or any employee with over 3% absence from work record.

It is essential that all employees be treated equally. Therefore you must make sure you monitor all employee absence records and that any action taken is consistent across the board. As soon as an employee reaches the limit shown above you should follow the process shown below.

Data Protection

You should also ensure that any medical information concerning an employee and their medical condition remains confidential between you, the employee and the Human Resources department.

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Return To Work Interview Structure

Introduction

- Outline the reason for the meeting
- Outline the format that the meeting will take

Establish the facts

Sickness absence

Is the employee fit to return to work?

- Did the employee visit a doctor? – If so, what was said?
- Is the employee taking any medication? – If so, will it affect their day to day duties?
- Is this illness related to any other sickness absence?
- Consider the employees past attendance record

Other absence

- Why was the employee away from work?
- Is the issue now resolved?
- Is there likely to be any further need for time off?

Summarise

- Reflect what the employee has said during the interview
- If necessary arrange a formal attendance review

Close

- Thank the employee for attending

The employee for should sign the form to confirm the content of the discussion.

A copy of the return to work interview should be kept on the employee's personal file.

Meeting an employee with a high level of absence

Preparation

1. Refer to any previous return to work interviews.
2. Identify any underlying absence trends such as a particular day of the week or time of the month that an employee may be absent from work. Similarly the Line Manager should look for any obvious links in the nature of the illness.
(What is presently held on their personal file? Have their file available if required)
3. Invite the employee to a meeting to discuss their attendance record.
(You should have already printed this record from your absence/computer records prior to this meeting).

The Meeting

4. The meeting should be treated as a fact finding interview to establish the exact cause of the absences and to express your concern regarding the employee's attendance record. During the meeting, providing there is no underlying long term medical condition you must outline exactly what you expect in terms of improvement in the attendance record including a timescale. Advise the employee this will be confirmed in a letter of concern.
5. You will be looking for a significant improvement within the agreed timescale. The employee must be advised that failure to meet the agreed attendance target may result in disciplinary action being taken against them.
6. Should the employee fail to meet the required standards then it must be made clear that they may face disciplinary action. Ultimately this may lead to the employee being dismissed with contractual notice.

After the meeting

7. Ensure that the employee receives a letter of concern. (See template letter of concern).
8. You must then monitor the employee's absence record closely during the agreed timescale.
9. A return to work interview should be carried out after every period of absence.
10. If there is no improvement over the timescale set, you may then wish to consider taking disciplinary action against the employee.
11. If you have any queries please refer to your HR Manager for advice.

Dealing with Long Term Absence

When an employee is absent from work for more than 4 weeks continuously they would be defined as long term sick and the action taken would very much depend on the circumstances; however it will almost certainly involve a number of home visits and a medical report.

When an employee has been off sick for a continuous 4 week spell you should contact your HR Manager to advise them of the following information: Name of employee, Job Title, Start date, 1st date of absence and reason for absence.

Throughout the 4 weeks you should be speaking with the employee at least once per week to enquire about their progress and to see if there is anything we could do that would help them to get back to work any sooner. If the employee is not, without good reason, following the absence reporting procedures this may also be a conduct matter requiring investigation.

As soon as 4 weeks has passed you should look to arrange a long term sick review meeting with the employee. This can be initially arranged over the telephone with the employee and then confirmed in writing using a standard absence review template letter.

Remember to assure the employee on the telephone that the purpose of the meeting is to gain a better understanding of their illness and to also find out if there are any steps that we can take that would enable them to return back to work as quickly as possible.

If the employee refuses to be present at such a meeting you should remind them that the meeting is being held in their best interests and give them the option of meeting either at their home, or on site or another mutually acceptable venue.

If the employee still does not want to co-operate then please refer the matter to your HR Manager.

Letter of concern – Informal Warning

<Date>

Strictly Private and Confidential

<Name>

<Address>

Dear <Name>

Further to our recent discussions held on <Date>, I am writing to formally express my concern over your recent levels of absence. According to our records you have been absent from work on <No> of separate occasions over the last <No> months for a total of <No>days. This equates to an absence of <no>%. This is considerably higher than the Company's tolerance level of 3%.

Although we are sympathetic to employees who are ill, you will appreciate that long term absence and frequent short-term absences, cause serious operational and staffing problems within a site.

Therefore, I must advise you that your attendance will be closely monitored over the coming months. In line with Company procedures, a return to work interview will be carried out when you return back to work after any future absences.

At this time a review on your attendance record will also take place and if there is no significant improvement we may have to contact your doctor or refer to an occupational Health specialist to provide us with a report on your general state of health and/or convene a formal meeting to discuss your attendance which may result in action being taken under the Company Disciplinary Procedure

I hope however that these measures will not prove necessary and that you will be able to make the required improvement in your attendance level.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any queries relating to the above.

Yours sincerely,

<Name>

Department Manager

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