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How to Reduce the Effects of Employee 'Presenteesim' Through the Use of the Company Employee Assistance Program

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Employers traditionally think about worker absenteeism when considering productivity problems, but more and more they are becoming aware of an issue that can negatively affect the workplace – presenteeism.

Presenteeism is a relatively new term that generally refers to employees coming to work when they are sick and unable to perform at their full capacity. Perhaps they have a cold or a headache, but show up for work anyway, but they just can't work at the same level that they normally do.

This kind of presenteeism is best dealt with by policies at the human resources department level and savvy managers that should send the sick employees home. You don't want people with the flu showing up and passing it on to the rest of your staff, which greatly decreases productivity.

But there's another kind of presenteeism that is not as obvious – employees who are at work, but, for a variety of reasons, their minds are somewhere else, distracting them from their work. This can take many forms. The social butterfly or the office counselor, for example, may spend too much time around the water cooler consumed with others' activities or problems.

Then there are employees who are having their own personal problems. Perhaps they have sick children or elderly parents they are concerned about, and they're spending an inordinate amount of time surfing health Web sites and calling to check in with caregivers. They may have financial problems, unresolved grief, kids acting out at school or other life issues that are distracting them and causing them to be less than productive.

Mental health issues such as depression or long-term stress may result, causing them to lose focus and make too many errors. No human can be 100 percent productive, 100 percent of the time. The question becomes, what is an acceptable level of productivity?

To deal with presenteeism, managers need to be trained to become aware of patterns of behavior in their employees. For example, during this time of year,

absenteeism and presenteeism among males may increase on Fridays and Mondays because of football season. If managers notice an employee calling in late or absent more frequently, or that employee seems to be less “with it” on those days following the big game, chances are he is staying up too late and possibly drinking too much, as well. If it happens once, it can be excused, but when it happens repeatedly, the problem needs to be addressed.

Likewise, if an executive assistant needs to leave her desk 10 minutes every hour to go cry in the restroom three months after her brother died, she likely has unresolved grief issues that are affecting her work performance.

So how can a manager handle these issues? The most important tools a manager has are for the company to have policies in writing and to put good employee orientation in place. Companies need to be clear about expectations and create an environment that encourages workplace engagement, such as mandating frequent supervisor feedback to employees about their performance. If the expectations are reasonable and appropriate for adults, employees will usually thrive.

Second, depending on the company policy and benefits, managers can make a mandatory referral to the company’s EAP (employee assistance program). The role of the EAP is to be supportive of the employee and the workplace. If a formal referral is made, the EAP will maintain communication with the supervisor to advise him/her of progress and recommend next steps, such as disciplinary action or short-term or long-term disability, if necessary. The employee must sign a confidentiality release before any details of communication with the counselor can be released.

While nobody can force somebody to change, working with your company’s EAP often produces a positive outcome for both the employee and the workplace when dealing with issues of presenteeism arising from an employee’s personal problems or behavior issues. Most employees want to do a good job, and they are grateful for the opportunity to get help for their problems and to correct their performance issues before more drastic consequences are necessary.



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