

PTH NEWSLETTER

Issue 18a January 2011



Performance Through Health



LIES, DAMN LIES AND STATISTICS

Work and Health . a review of sickness absence management findings

We are often told by the media that the United Kingdom is the 'sick man of Europe'. But does this broad statement hold true, and what can employers and employees together learn from the research done on this subject?

The most recent Chartered Institute of Professional Development (CIPD) Annual Survey Report (2010) provides some statistics that may not come as a complete surprise: an average 9.6 days are lost per employee in the public sector, compared to 6.6 days in the private sector; and that occupational sick pay arrangements for full payment for more than 20 weeks is available to 64% of public employees, compared to just 20% of those working for private enterprises.

Public sector organisations, however, are less likely to employ a disciplinary policy to ensure appropriate workplace attendance (77%) compared to their private sector management colleagues (94%). Health promotion at 60% usage by public sector employers though, compared to 28% usage by their private sector counterparts, remains a key strategy in the improvement of the working lives of employees; in fact 22% of organisations overall having increased funding in this field this year, compared to 9% who reduced spending over the same period.

What is more, 38% of organisations have noted an increase in the reporting of mental health concerns, most typically a third declaring stress to be a major factor.

The Health and Safety Executive's (HSE's) Health and Safety Laboratory 2008 survey (Holmes, 2008) reported a comprehensive analysis of absence from work at the CIPD, NHS, Confederation of British Industry (CBI), Engineering Employers' Federation (EEF), Local Government Employers' Organisation (LGO) and the Cabinet Office (CO). The conclusions showed, perhaps unsurprisingly, a wide variation in what was meant by the term sickness absence, specifically because the reporting of individual statistics by illness or injury could perhaps at best be deemed to be varied.

For example, the NHS reported a 35.5% response under the heading of employees who experienced work-related stress, whereas the LGO gathered depression, anxiety and fatigue under the same umbrella in its responses (21.7%) and, similarly, the Cabinet Office considered all absences due to 'mental disorders' at 5.2%.

There are variations in the sickness absence rates between men and women, young and old, full time and part time employees. The NHS provided no information on the length of absences at all.

Across Europe, the 4th European Working Conditions Survey (2007) at least provided a brighter note . that despite common misconceptions, only 21% of workers in the UK reported work affecting their health, compared to 35% of employees amongst our European counterparts (Crain, Personnel Today, March 2007). Furthermore, the average UK employee takes an average 3.7 days' sickness absence, whereas his European cousin requires 4.6 days.

But what can we glean from the welter of statistics that are put before employees, Human Resource and management departments of the organisations we advise?

Firstly, that much of the effort put into attendance management and objectives is worthwhile, certainly. That innovative processes, strategies and ways of ensuring a flexible, well-motivated and healthy workforce are essential? Without a doubt. But what comes across most of all seems to be the need for co-ordination between the partners in the enterprise: employer and employee as mutual stakeholders in the need for maintaining and improving workplace health and ensuring successful business and employment promotion, and Occupational Health as a link between the two to guide this investment in health promotion.

Finally, it would appear that there remains a wide variance in reporting strategies for absence and what qualifies as an illness in any given category. Without precise and co-ordinated reporting methods across each employment sector, of course, any improvement targets will be far harder to reach and will continually shift.

But the signs are there that companies are investing in health, and in the UK at least the provision of one of the highest ratios of Occupational Health services per employee seems to be bearing fruit. The title 'sick man of Europe' is one we already appear to have relinquished!