

Good Work Design: Managing absence



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Everyone will be absent from work at some point

How a manager or supervisor responds to a worker's absence can impact the person's engagement with work, how long they are away and future absences.

Absenteeism goes beyond a few days off and includes all unscheduled absences which are unusual or excessive, such as:

- large or increasing number of sick days per year
- systematic pattern of absence, for example one day every week
- frequently leaving work early or arriving late
- taking excessively long breaks
- not being contactable during work hours.

Employees value communication from their manager not just about their role and responsibilities, but also about what happens in their life outside of work.



What great managers do

Why it matters

Not all situations require workers to be away from work. Often, with the right support a person can manage an illness or injury, caring responsibilities or other personal commitments and still get the work done. When a person needs to take significant time away from work the right support can help them to stay engaged and connected. Great managers understand work-life challenges and focus on supporting work participation.

Managing absence effectively supports the whole team and can [improve employee retention](#).

How it's done

It's important to address absenteeism as soon as you notice that there is a pattern developing or become concerned.

Having an early conversation is the single most effective measure for reducing short-term unscheduled absences. These conversations demonstrate to your worker that their absence has been noticed and that you care.

Your organisation will have policies and guidelines for managing absence and supporting people to stay at work. You should also think **A.W.A.Y.** and ask: 'can they be supported to work?' Sometimes they can't and they need time away from work, other times they can. Either way — you must work out how you can support them.

Think A.W.A.Y.

Always try to understand the reason for the absence.

Work out support.

Address any work causes and manage the impact on the team.

Your HR team and manager can help you.



Can they be supported at work?



1 Always try to understand the reason for and length of absence

Reasons may not be obvious, but they could include:

- Chronic illness or disability
- Poor general physical health
 - Inadequate physical activity



Physical ill-health

- Premenstrual disorders, endometriosis and menopause
- Obesity
- Poor sleep quality



Mental ill-health

- Depressive or anxiety disorders
- Personality factors
- Higher perceived stress levels

DRIVERS OF ABSENTEEISM

Organisational factors

- Leadership style
- Working hours
- Type of employment
 - Workplace incivility and bullying behaviours
- Corporate culture
- Caring responsibilities
- High job demands



Psychosocial factors

- Peers or co-workers
- Work ability and work enjoyment
- Emotional dissonance
- Sickness presenteeism
- Poor quality of work life



- Raise your concerns with your employee in a respectful and empathetic way.
- Ask open ended questions, for example: 'I've noticed that you're not engaging in team meetings as much, is everything OK?'
- Remember to respect people's privacy if they choose not to tell you why they are absent.

Presenteeism can be as big an issue as absenteeism, with greater productivity loss. Common conditions that people come in to work with include:

- mental ill health
- viruses
- back pain
- severe headaches/migraine
- allergies
- long COVID/chronic fatigue
- personal life distractions or issues.



Just take your time, there's no rush.



Simple support can make a huge difference



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2 Work out support

Great managers support their team members whether they are away or still working. [Research](#) shows that employees who feel their managers are invested in them as people are more likely to be engaged. Leaders who inspire and empower their teams have [lower rates](#) of absenteeism.

When you identify a trend of absenteeism:

- encourage them to talk and actively listen
- be patient and try to understand their experience. For example, 'Just take your time, there's no rush. I can see this is difficult to talk about.'
- let them know you will support them. For example, 'Let's talk about some options for how we can best support you.'

Support people while they're away

- Reach out to see how they are.
- Reassure them that their work is being taken care of.

Support people to still work

- Encourage work from home while they manage an illness/issue.
- Support flexible hours and/or breaks to attend appointments.
- Negotiate flexible workdays to meet caring responsibilities.

3 Address any work causes and manage the impact

If a person's absence is related to workplace issues, such as work demands or conflict, it's important to address these [hazards](#) straight away to prevent further harm to the health of the team.

- Talk to the team about issues relevant to them.
- Ask what can be changed to improve conditions.
- Put measures in place to manage psychosocial risks.

[Research](#) shows high job demands are associated with high work-family conflict, emotional exhaustion and absenteeism.

4 Your HR team and manager can help you

If you still feel unsure how you can best support someone, contact your manager support service, HR or speak with your manager. Sometimes talking it through can help you to feel more confident about the steps you are going to take.

Tip: For longer absences, consider taking an active case management approach. This involves working together with HR and relevant treating practitioners to provide coordinated support.