

The Absenteeism Report 2018

Causes, consequences and cures

October 2018



Introduction

Absence is something that all businesses have to face up to. The simple fact is that companies employ human beings and, naturally, they will need time off. Yet, as the old business cliché goes, 'time is money' and time lost to absence can prove a big drag on productivity and, therefore, the amount of money brought in.

Indeed, [one study found](#) that workplace absence costs the UK as a whole £18 billion, a figure that is set to rise to £21 billion in 2020 and £26 billion in 2030.

Those numbers alone suggest why this is a topic that should be taken seriously, but it also pays to consider what this means on a more granular level that you can relate to. CEO Today calculated that – based on an average working day for an average UK salary – [a sick day costs just over £100](#).

A sick day costs a company just over £100 on average

Yet, while numbers such as this place the issue into context, it's important to look beyond the figures and get a feel for what causes them. This report aims to help you to do this.

Understanding what's meant by absenteeism

Before we can understand absenteeism, however, we need to understand what we mean by this broad umbrella term. This covers three different areas that need to be fully understood. These are long term sickness – people with serious conditions or personal circumstances that have to be carefully managed – short term sicknesses and unauthorised absences from employees who don't turn up for work when they're not ill. It's about the health and happiness of the workforce, and how this contributes to absenteeism.

Businesses need to understand all three of these aspects and their own individual role in assisting with these. While some level of absence should be expected, companies could – and should – play their part in helping to keep their employees healthy and happy and, therefore, in work as much as possible.

But, how many businesses understand their role and how many of them are performing this successfully?

Absenteeism 2018: Our Survey

We commissioned a survey of HR professionals to find out their views on 20 key questions that fall within the topic of absenteeism to get a snapshot of the picture as it stands in 2018, the challenges faced and what needs to be done to improve.



We began by asking respondents just how many sick days an average employee takes at their business. The most common answer was three – with 16.9% of people saying this – but almost one in five people (18.1%) said that the average workers took seven or more sick days, including 7.38% who said their average was above ten days.

18.1%

Almost **one-in-five people** – say the average employee in their business has seven or more sick days a year

Given that official government data suggests that the average number of sick days per employee in the UK is 4.1, this suggests that there is a huge variety within different companies behind this average figure and that some businesses clearly lose a lot more days to absence than the average. Businesses have to think

carefully about whether or not they are contributing to their individual score and what they might be able to change to bring this down.

Across the course of this report, we'll look at the role of workplace environment, some of the practical ways in which businesses should react to absence, the role of holiday and flexitime, a couple of potential missing pieces of the puzzle, the role of technology in addressing absence and the trends for absence that are important to understand.



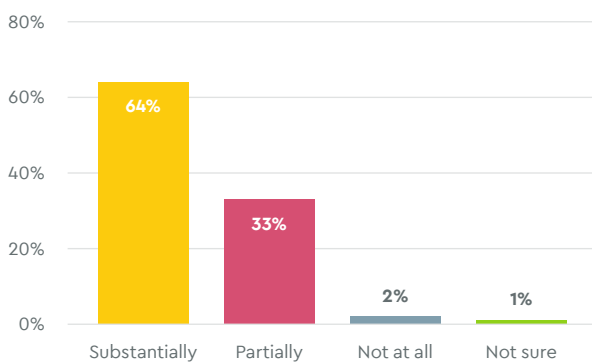
Are you making absenteeism worse?

The working environment matters a lot – and that's in both senses of the word 'environment'. Whether it's the physical building in which you work – everything from the desks and chairs to the décor on the walls and equipment you use – or the environment in the wider sense – the culture of the team and the morale of the workforce, it's crucial to consider the effectiveness of this in a business.

The message of our survey respondents is that getting either of these aspects wrong could easily contribute to an increased rate of absenteeism.

The majority of the people polled by AdviserPlus (64%) said that they felt that a poor work environment could 'substantially' contribute to sickness levels. Only two per cent of respondents felt that it has no impact at all.

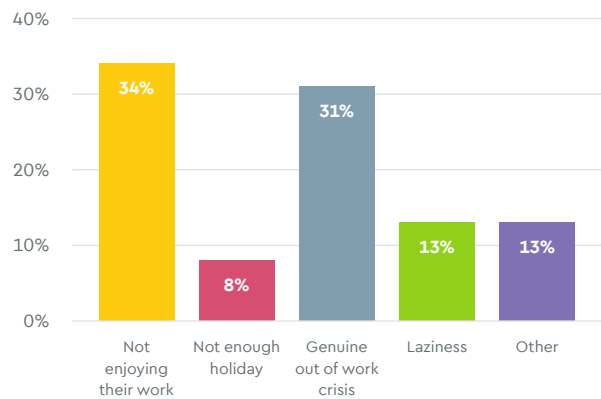
To what extent do you believe a poor work environment can contribute to sickness levels?



The survey also delivered a couple of other revealing stats that show the importance of the workplace environment – and why businesses need to consider their own role in causing or increasing the issue of absence in their own organisation.

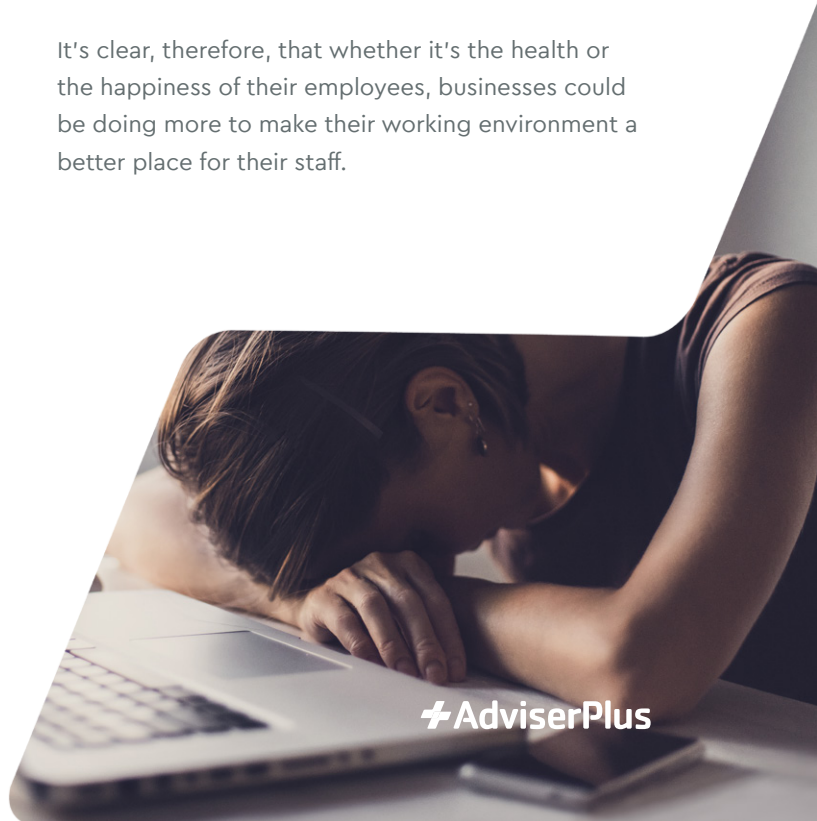
Firstly, the most popular reason given by respondents for employees taking unauthorised absence was 'not enjoying their work'.

What do you believe is the main reason for employees taking unauthorised absences?



Secondly, when asked if businesses should be more proactive in promoting a healthy lifestyle to their employees, 91% said yes.

It's clear, therefore, that whether it's the health or the happiness of their employees, businesses could be doing more to make their working environment a better place for their staff.



There are two sides to this too – a bad environment might discourage employees from coming to work but a good environment might not only help to avoid this sense of discouragement but also act as an encouragement, giving workers something positive and purposeful to go to.

Workplace environment 'undoubtedly' plays a role

Rachel Suff, Senior Policy Adviser at the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD), told AdviserPlus that a healthy workplace environment can 'undoubtedly' encourage good attendance levels.

She said: "This means paying attention to workplace ergonomics, ensuring that the equipment and environment is suitable for people. It involves addressing both the physical aspects, such as having adequate ventilation and temperature control and creating pleasant break out areas and quiet spaces for people, as well as the less tangible factors. These include a range of elements such as good people management, an inclusive culture, positive working relationships and a line management style that is open and supportive.

"There should be opportunities for people to have a voice at work and be treated with dignity and respect. Employers should not forget the social aspects of creating a positive working environment, and how teamworking and informal opportunities to engage with each other can help to foster creativity and a good sense of well-being."



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Rachel Suff, CIPD

Important to have happy workers

It is worth stressing the link between employee happiness and productivity – something which helps to confirm the business case for considering the role of the workplace environment.

Richmond Stace, a specialist pain physiotherapist and coach who treats clients in London's Harley Street, pointed to a number of studies that demonstrate the link between happiness and both productivity and success. He noted that happiness comes from a range of emotions that come and go – e.g., joy and pleasure – as well as a sense of meaning and purpose in life. This latter aspect is where the working environment comes into play.

He said: "Deciding to go to work can depend upon contractual arrangements (e.g., I'm only paid whilst at work), commitment to the workplace and a belief that work is important and must be attended as a matter of course.

"The decision can equally be impacted upon by the level of engagement with the work place, relationships with the boss and colleagues, the environment, a sense of autonomy and job satisfaction and the level of appreciation – 'am I valued?'. Happiness will be affected by all of these factors and more, and vice versa. With happiness bringing better health, it is less likely the person will be off work."

He added: "It makes sense to create an encouraging environment where people feel valued, are given autonomy and flexibility."



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Richmond Stace, Pain Coach

Rachel Suff agrees that happy workers are less likely to take time off.


She explained: "If workers have a positive sense of wellbeing, they are more likely to feel engaged with their work and committed to the organisation. This means they are more likely to exert discretionary effort, which can lead to outcomes such as better customer service and higher performance levels.

"There is evidence to show that there are links between employee wellbeing, resilience and absence. Given that mental ill health and stress are two of the three main causes of long-term sickness absence from work, employers need to develop working environments that tackle the underlying causes of work-related stress to reduce the risks to people's psychological health.

"They also need to have strategies in place to help prevent mental ill health, such as signposting to support counselling to help someone stay in work, while recognising that there will be times when people are unwell and need to take time off to recover."



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Rachel Suff, CIPD

Improving the workplace environment

While the principle and theory seem sound, how is this done in practice?


Richmond Stace feels that managers can lead by example and set the tone for a positive working environment. He says they can do this through a number of methods, from exercise and breathing techniques that keep them fit and calm, through to demonstrating kindness and gratitude to others in a team, and noticing and reflecting on what makes you laugh or feel a sense of joy and reflecting on this.

He said: "Leaders and managers can adopt such an approach, leading the way. They can choose to engage employees and create an atmosphere of encouragement, learning and growth as a team, with each member feeling valued and heard. It appears that this approach does work."


There's more to creating a positive environment than just leading by example, however. Companies can offer a range of measures that can help to promote health and happiness.

For Rachel Suff, businesses should work with their employees and look to offer the sort of wellbeing initiatives that they would actually appreciate.

She said: "A programme can include initiatives that encourage people to increase their level of physical activity, such as lunchtime walking clubs, a cycle to work scheme, or yoga or pilates classes – but not everyone will want to participate and so it's good to develop a range of different options.



A programme can include initiatives that encourage people to increase their level of physical activity.



Rachel Suff, CIPD

"A physical activity programme could go hand in hand with promoting healthy eating, and there are a number of ways this can be communicated to staff, for example providing free fruit or having 'fruity Friday', posting engaging articles about nutrition on the staff intranet or creating a healthy eating menu club.

"The employer could also offer voluntary waist and weight checks, allow people time off to attend nutrition or diet classes, or sponsor staff to attend healthy cooking courses. It's important that any focus on weight and healthy eating is carried out in a sensitive way, given the sensitivities some people may have about weight and body image. Smoking cessation is another health promotion activity that some employees could appreciate, although again

this should be a personal choice and not everyone wants to give up."

How it's done: Real-life examples

So, what about real life companies who have already looked at this? How have they tried to boost their working environment, and has it actually worked to reduce absence?

Patrick O'Kane worked for a busy management team for clothing retailer Primark in the Netherlands.

Aside from themed onesie or fancy dress days for the employees – which proved positive – the firm would also arrange 'VIP nights' to boost morale.

He explained: "These would involve a sort of fashion show. We used to do a minimum four a year, with the odd randomly organised spur of the moment evening too.

"On these nights the managers would become the models and wear outlandish outfits, almost embarrassing you might say, but the staff loved it. Once the fashion show was finished the staff would have two hours to go shopping with no customers in store, with the managers working as till operatives.

"Often we would bring in upwards of £2,000 on these nights, with friends and family invites.

"The staff morale and team ambience would be heightened as a result. They were usually done turn of the season and in the run up to Christmas as a way of giving back before the big Christmas push and after it as a thank you.

"We used to love it. They became so popular everyone started baking cakes and bringing homemade treats and it was a real party atmosphere. It just bolstered the fun element to work and reminded the staff they are important among the stressful work we do.



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Patrick O'Kane, Primark

"A happy workplace is a healthy workplace so we loved it."



Many other companies are also thinking creatively about fun things they can do to improve their workplace environment.

London and Essex-based digital marketing agency Bulldog holds beach barbecues and bring your dog to work days – the sort of things that many similar creative companies do – but has also produced a video series about office life.

New episodes are released on a weekly basis and staff gather together to watch them when they go live.

Buzz Carter, Head of Outreach at Bulldog, told AdviserPlus that the video series aims to increase morale and help to build a sense of excitement among the team.

He explained: "I think fun things like the video series have an effect on absences, we try as hard as possible to have a fun work environment and we have found the more resources we've put into fun activities at work the lower our absentee rate is. "Happy workers usually have less need for time off like sick days, people who are healthy mentally are usually healthy physically as well – it's a case of 'happy mind happy body'.



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Buzz Carter, Bulldog

"Also, because no one is really taking 'sickies', when someone is actually ill they don't feel uneasy about taking off a day to recover – and having people take time off for actual illness stops it spreading throughout the office and getting more people sick.

"From a health perspective being happy at work is key to your overall health, if the thought of work depresses you, you're more vulnerable to mental health issues as well as actual health issues, so being

happy at work and participating in fun work activities is good for everyone."

It's clear, therefore, that more businesses are putting time and effort into improving their workplace environment and that this is, at least in part, aimed at addressing absence. While there isn't necessarily a one-size-fits-all plan that every business can adopt, it's clear that they should be doing something to help with the health and happiness of their employees. While this can't eradicate absence, businesses can at least create the conditions that are needed to avoid making the issue worse than it might need to be.



Chapter Two

The importance of the back to work interview

The last chapter explored the ways in which businesses are able to improve their working environment to reduce the rate of absenteeism in the workplace.

Yet, while this can be effective, there's always going to be a need for an appropriate response to absence among employees when instances occur.

The 'front line' when it comes to responding to absence comes with the 'back to work interview' – the chat between a line manager and a returning employee that should happen after each instance of sickness.

In our survey, almost all respondents – 89% – said that they conducted these interviews, although this still means that more than one in ten don't.

However, only 27.9% of respondents told us that they thought that these interviews were 'very successful'.

Only 27.9%
of people said back to work
interviews are very successful

Pat Ashworth, Director of AdviserPlus Learning Solutions, told us that she wasn't surprised to see that most respondents weren't confident that their back to work interviews were having the desired effect.

She said: "I think there is scope for improvement here – there's quite a mixed bag in terms of the quality of return to work interviews.

"I think they do sometimes tend to be tick box exercises, almost done in an automated way."

According to Pat, these interviews are important for three key reasons:

1. They show that you actually care about an employee and are interested in how they are feeling.
2. They give companies the chance to spot the signs of a wider problem before it escalates.
3. They create a clear process for returning to work rather than letting the individual slip back into the workplace without a discussion.

"For people who are taking liberties – and these are the exception rather than the rule – they need to know that somebody will sit down and talk to them when they return.

"For some, this might make them less inclined to have further absences."



There's a really important message to the individual to let them know you care about them.

Pat Ashworth, AdviserPlus



Spotting underlying issues is key

The key to a successful return to work interview is to be able to spot the signs of any deeper underlying problems that may have caused the absence – and may lead to further absences down the line.

Employees might well have said that they had a migraine or a bug on the phone, but this is your chance to explore whether or not this is a one-off or a symptom of a wider issue that you need to be aware of.

Clearly, employers don't want to pry. But in trying to understand their employees better and taking an interest in their personal situation they might well be able to help them to overcome any issues they might be facing. That's particularly pertinent in an era where one in three recorded sick days are related to mental health conditions (a figure that may even be much higher given the reluctance that people have to confide in their boss).

Pat Ashworth explained: "What we know about mental health issues is that they are hidden. People often want to talk and a really effective meeting, conducted in the right way, can lead to openness and trust."



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Pat Ashworth, AdviserPlus



Why the line manager's role is key

This all means that quite a lot rests on the line manager – and they have to be able to handle these chats effectively. That means making them informal enough to create an atmosphere in which an employee wants to talk, but formal enough for them to be able to get the important information they need to be able to monitor and manage their absence.

Yet, while this can be a fine balance, Pat Ashworth believes that line managers can easily be trained to be able to pick up the skills they require. She said: "Some managers have a natural flair for those things but the skills are trainable and a few key tips and techniques will go a long way. It's all about effective listening."



It's all about effective listening.

Pat Ashworth, AdviserPlus



But should this responsibility necessarily rest with the line manager? Two thirds of respondents to our survey feel that it should – and Pat believes they're right that it's essential that they perform this task as they are the people who can be close enough to their employees to be able to spot the signs if something is wrong.

Pat feels that people are less likely to be candid with someone they don't know – and that a disconnect between a line manager and an employee is not a healthy position for a business, both in a wider sense and in terms of managing and monitoring absenteeism.

She revealed: "If you take that away from the line manager – in terms of talking to an individual – I feel like it dilutes things. If they are speaking to a third party, then that person is not going to be able to pick up some of the signs and signals."

A well-trained line manager, therefore, should be at the front-line for addressing a company's attitude towards absenteeism. Provided they understand the three key

purposes of the interview and appreciate why they need to do this, they can start to turn these from tick box exercises into highly useful activities that benefit both sides.



Chapter Three

Holiday and flexitime: The key to conquering absence?

Not all absences are the result of employees not being able to attend work, of course. All staff are entitled to take a holiday from their position and this time away is vital in helping them to re-charge their batteries and come back fresh and ready for new challenges in the workplace.

There are legal minimum standards that must be offered to employees, namely 28 days holiday, including Bank Holidays.

But, should employers use the carrot of holiday as a way to motivate their employees? Does offering more holiday ensure that people are less likely to skip work? Or is too much holiday a risk to the productivity of your workforce?

A fair holiday allowance

As part of our survey, we asked HR experts how many days holiday should be given to employees (excluding Bank Holidays).

The most popular answer was 25 – with 43.8% of people saying that this was their preference. However, the second most popular answer was 30 days, with a quarter of respondents believing that staff should be giving this many days off a year.

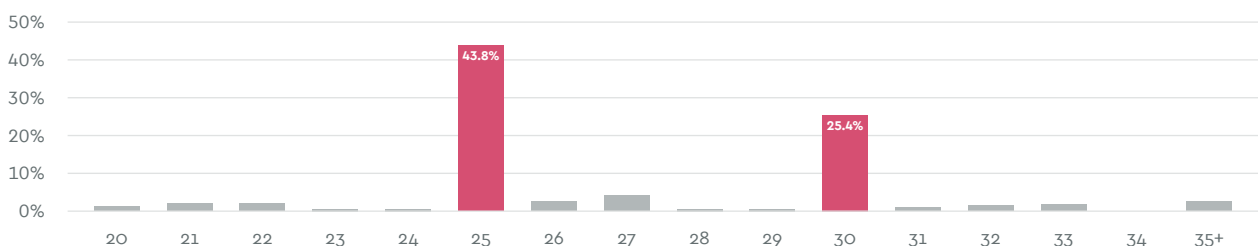
Only 1.2% of people said that they thought that the legal minimum should be offered – perhaps a sign that businesses would be seen as miserly if this was all they gave to their employees.

Rachel Suff, Senior Policy Adviser (Employment Relations) at the CIPD, said that extra holiday is welcome – but that businesses need to try to ensure that their staff don't end up using their holiday to catch up with their work as this can make matters worse.

She told us: "Workers do have a statutory entitlement to annual leave in the UK, and so employers have to provide the minimum. Any enhancement to holiday entitlement is likely to be welcomed by people. It's also important that organisations encourage people to take the leave to which they are entitled, as CIPD research finds that over two-thirds of employers are aware of 'leaveism' among employees. This means that many people are working when they should be on holiday, or using holiday entitlement when they are actually unwell.

Over two-thirds
of employers are aware of
'leaveism' among employees.

In your opinion, how many days of holiday do you believe an employee should be given?



"This is not the sign of a healthy workplace as people need to switch off from work and relax, so employers should send the right messages out to people and ensure they take all of their allocated leave, and enjoy their leisure time away from work. The statutory right to holiday is there for a reason, and recognises that people will come back rested and more productive if they have a break."

That suggests that while a larger holiday allowance can be attractive – certainly to candidates – it's just as important that these days can genuinely be free of the worries of work.

The role of flexitime

While holiday allowances give employees scope to do whatever they want, workers increasingly value the chance to be able to fit their job around their day-to-day lives.

This isn't just a work-life balance thing either – although 63% of people say that this is more important to them than pay – it also means that they are less inclined to need to be able to miss work for other things in their lives.

Rachel Suff added: "Providing flexibility for people at work can help people to balance their personal and work responsibilities. For example, just a small amount of flexibility in working hours at the beginning or end of the day can help people with caring responsibilities to drop off or collect children from childcare or school, or visit elderly or ill relatives.



Providing flexibility for people at work can help people to balance their personal and work responsibilities.

Rachel Suff, CIPD

"CIPD research shows that just over 10% of employers cite unexplained or non-genuine reasons as a cause of short-term sickness absence.

"There could be a number of underlying reasons for unauthorised absence but creating a more flexible working culture, and allowing employees a bit more control over their working hours, such as flexitime, could help to reduce levels of non-genuine absence."

Our survey found that 87.19% of HR professionals believe that flexitime can reduce unauthorised absence – showing that there is a sense that companies should consider this as a way to tackle absenteeism as well as being part of a wider management strategy.

87.19%
of HR professionals
believe flexitime can cut
unauthorised absence


Kate Bell, Head of Economics for the TUC (Trades Union Congress), said that – done right – she feels that flexible working can aid both business and employee.

She told AdviserPlus: "There's a lot of research linking long working hours to higher rates of ill-health, particularly heart disease, stress, depression and workplace injuries. And we believe flexibility can be good for wellbeing too. It can reduce stress, and make it easier for working mums and dads to manage childcare arrangements.


"We think that flexible working is a win-win for both employers and workers. It helps with productivity and retention. And it means staff can do shorter days in quiet periods to balance early starts and late finishes when it's busier."

The TUC's long term aim is to campaign for a four-day week, and use trends such as automation and artificial intelligence to cut the amount of time workers are having to spend in the workplace.

Kate Bell added: "The future of work should allow people greater flexibility, with technology used to help organise workflows and working time around workers lives. Workers should also get higher pay and shorter working hours as their share from the wealth that will be created by the next generation of automation technologies like AI. We believe that a 4-day week by the end of the current century is an achievable goal."



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Kate Bell, TUC


Pat Ashworth, Director of AdviserPlus Learning Solutions, said that companies do have to be careful with how this is managed, regardless of the level of flexibility they choose to offer. She explained: "We are in an era now where working from home is the norm. That has pros and cons – whilst giving an employee more flexibility it can also mask a sickness issue."

Sickness can be masked by people asking to work from home because they feel stressed or worried about what awaits in the workplace environment – and because line managers might struggle to have the face to face interaction they need to be able to spot a problem and act on it.


While Pat believes that, on the whole, flexitime is a force for good – particularly in allowing people to still work when they have a mild condition that could be made worse by turning up for work (known as presenteeism) and avoiding spreading germs – she said it's still important to appreciate the virtues of being able to go in to work.

She emphasised that turning up to work provides stability by providing an income, social interaction with colleagues and structure to someone's day, adding: "Those three Ss are really good for you."

"Going to work is good for you. The more progressive organisations get that and that's why they focus on it."



Going to work is good for you. The more progressive organisations get that and that's why they focus on it.



Pat Ashworth, AdviserPlus

There's clearly a balance to strike, therefore. While more holiday sounds good – and can be beneficial – it's just as important that holiday time is completely work-free and that 'leavism' isn't allowed to take root in a business. Equally, while flexitime and new working practices are welcomed – and increasingly the norm – companies shouldn't let this mask any sickness that they have in their organisation or take away from the positive aspects that come from being in a healthy workplace environment.

Chapter Four

The missing pieces of the puzzle?

When it comes to absenteeism, it's perhaps only natural to think about the issue purely in a reactive sense. After all, from the back to work interview to the data collected on absences, much time is spent looking back to events that have already happened.

Yet, are organisations not missing a trick if they don't consider the proactive things they can do too? We've already seen that some businesses are able to improve their working environment in such a way that boosts the morale of employees – and many are able to use their holiday allowance and flexitime to help workers fit their job around their lives.

These are clearly positive steps for businesses to take, but how do they take a measured approach to this proactive and preventative work and avoid their efforts being ad hoc, sporadic and incoherent?

Workplace health strategies

Many businesses may choose to get around this with a workplace health strategy – a document that sets out what they're going to do, why they're going to do it and how to judge the results. It's the sort of document that sets out the groundwork so that employees can see what you're doing – and that management can appreciate the business case for any measures that are being implemented here.

Yet, the majority of businesses we surveyed do not implement such a strategy. Could this, then, be a missing piece of the puzzle when it comes to tackling absenteeism?

57.6%

The majority of businesses
(57.6%) don't implement a
workplace health strategy.

That's certainly the view of Director of AdviserPlus Learning Solutions Pat Ashworth, who said businesses without a workplace health strategy are thinking in the wrong way about the topic. She said: "They are not thinking about the bigger picture – it's more draconian and about monitoring and measuring attendance rather than being proactive and thinking how to keep people well and in work.

"They are not looking holistically."

She said that businesses are increasingly looking to have such a strategy in place as they are beginning to see the benefits of a proactive approach when it comes to preventing absenteeism and the knock-on effect that this can have on productivity.

Pat explained: "It's certainly the way in which organisations are going. On a fairly frequent basis now I find I am talking to heads of wellbeing. The fact that organisations are appointing someone and giving them that title is a fair sign that they are taking the health and wellbeing of their people seriously.



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Pat Ashworth, AdviserPlus



"It will be a long time coming for all businesses to be in that proactive space though." She said that the businesses who think carefully about this tend to have been the ones that have explored what they stand for as a company and how they want to demonstrate this.

She added: "This is cultural. Organisations who care about their culture are much more likely to have an inclusion strategy and one element of that is health management.

"They're saying 'here in our business everyone is welcome and we care about the welfare of our people'.



Organisations who care about their culture are much more likely to have an inclusion strategy and one element of that is health management.

Pat Ashworth, AdviserPlus



"Beyond that, of course, there's always 'what does this cost you?' and that's important for building the business case too."

This is all helped by greater access to data and smart people analytics – and understanding the makeup of the team and what the individuals in that team need to help create a better working environment. That comes from a combination of data analysis, as well as people management expertise.

The Bradford Factor

One piece of data that can be used to help monitor and manage absence is the Bradford Factor. This formula aims to demonstrate the way in which multiple short-term periods of sickness can be more disruptive than one long term period of the same length – and does so by attributing a score to individuals based on the number of spells of absence they have had as well as the total number of days.

Yet almost two thirds of the HR professionals we asked (**64.83%**) do not use the Bradford Factor in their business.

64.83%

of people do not use the Bradford Factor

This might, in part, be due to the limitations of this as a piece of data. After all, businesses have

to be careful not to forget the 'person behind the score', especially since people with disabilities or serious health conditions are highly likely to require frequent short term absences and will have a high score as a result.

Yet, it's always the role of people in HR to put their data into context and use it to inform the way they look after people. Many businesses simply use these scores alongside thresholds, so that key personnel are prompted of the need for further investigation and action.

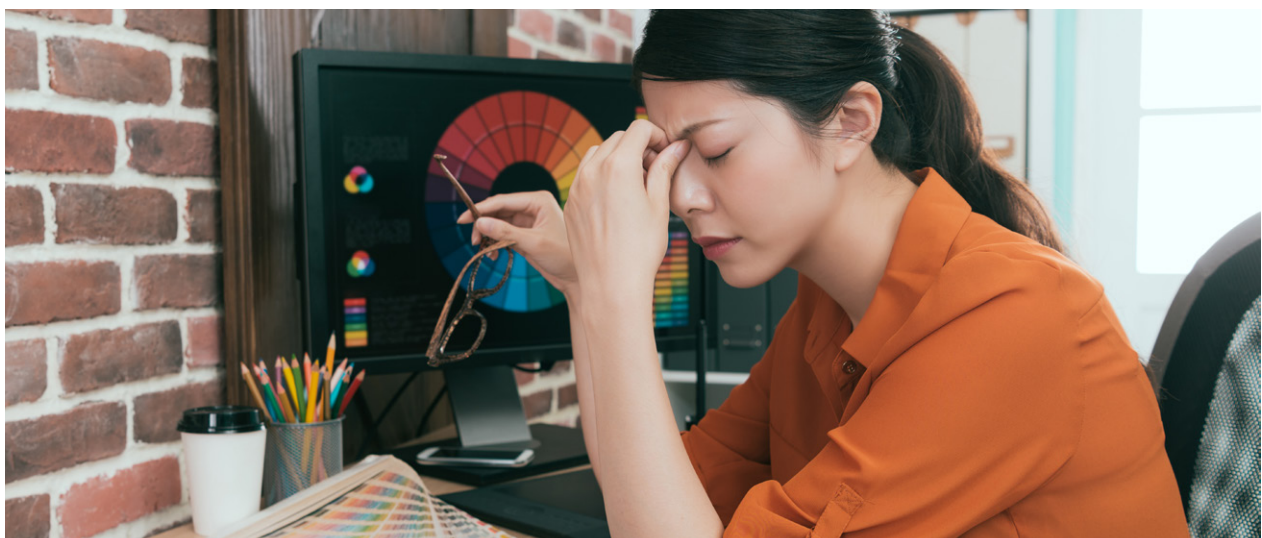
Pat said: "Organisations don't need to use the Bradford Factor per se, but they do need to be doing something to give some structure to what attendance at work looks like.

Organisations don't need to use the Bradford Factor per se, but they do need to be doing something to give some structure to what attendance at work looks like.

Pat Ashworth, AdviserPlus

"What the Bradford Factor does give you is a prompt to act – so long as you get the same prompts you can get the same benefit."

It's fair to say, therefore, that the lack of popularity for the Bradford Factor is not an issue – provided that companies are using the principles and have a mechanism to be able to intervene when absence reaches a certain rate. Conversely, it is a problem if they're missing a workplace health strategy that sets out how and why the wellbeing of employees is going to be looked after. This might well be the missing piece of the puzzle and something many businesses could and should look at to reduce their own rate of absence.



The role of technology

HR departments everywhere have been embroiled in something of a technological transformation – a topic we've explored in our recent ['HR and the Digital Revolution' eBook](#).

This is, of course, not something that is exclusive to HR – it's the context in which all businesses are operating and the way in which the world now runs in and out of the workplace.

Yet, is technology helping businesses to be able to monitor absence more effectively? Our survey shows a mixed picture that is worth exploring in more detail.

More than half of the respondents to our survey – 57.19% – say that they do use technology to monitor absence levels in their business. However, a majority (52.98%) also feel that technology could aid them more in this regard.

52.98%

feel technology can help them more to monitor absenteeism.

HR departments, therefore, appear to be using technology to look at the issue of absenteeism – but

are aware that there is greater potential for this to be used in a better way.

Or, at least, a majority are. AdviserPlus Commercial Director, Michael Campbell, suggests that there are three definitions that might be applied to the word 'monitoring' when it comes to absence – and it's important to understand the difference.

Three ways to define 'monitoring' in terms of absence:

- 1. Recording absence** – Simply recording periods of absence, and the reasons.
- 2. Managing absence** – Using recorded absence data to drive follow-up meetings and actions that will help manage absence.
- 3. Analysing absence** – Using the data captured to identify themes and patterns, forecast future trends and use this to inform a strategy to reduce absence.

Michael believes that almost all businesses have a mechanism to achieve the first point but exceptions exist – especially in the retail sector where line managers don't always have access to the necessary systems.

He further explained that technology alone is not enough: "You can have the best system in the world but if there are no consequences for managers not using it effectively, it doesn't fulfil its purpose and you could be masking the size of your problem through under-reporting absence."

"It doesn't matter what technology is in place if you don't have the right behaviours trained and ingrained in managers and, preferably, in the workforce too."

It doesn't matter what technology is in place if you don't have the right behaviours trained and ingrained in managers and preferably the workforce.

Michael Campbell, AdviserPlus

Michael suggests that, whereas most businesses have in place a mechanism for recording absences, fewer harness the technology to drive line manager ownership of sickness absence through proven engagements, such as keep-in-touch meetings and back-to-work interviews and follow-up activities.

When it comes to the final part, analytics, Michael feels that the proportion of businesses that truly utilise the sickness absence data they capture to profile, benchmark and model future scenarios is a minority.

Indeed, it's probably with the need for greater analytics, strategic thinking and proactive responses in mind that the majority of our respondents are saying that they feel technology can do more for them when it comes to absenteeism.

Michael added: "I think more progressive HR teams and business leaders would be looking to understand the underlying cause to affect change."

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He said this comes with predictive analytics, adding: "Many organisations may be using that buzz phrase but they aren't achieving that capability in practice."

HR ready for the next stage of evolution

In some respects, the changes already seen when it comes to technology have laid the important groundwork for the next stage of the evolution required in this regard. The fact that HR departments now collect and use data effectively is a positive, and deeper utilisation of that data is the next step in the process.

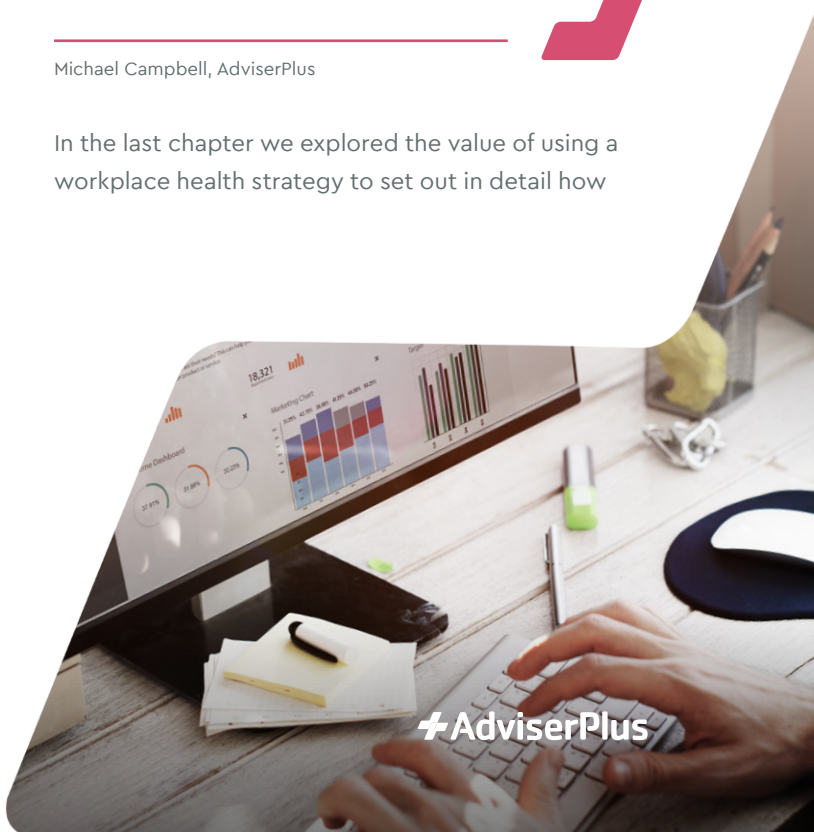
Michael explained: "Organisations are recognising the value of data. Now it's seen as a resourceful asset and something that can be used to affect business change."

"I think organisations are increasingly starting to understand how to build a business case to invest in analytics capability – whether in-house or using third party expertise. There's absolutely an emerging awareness of the value of this potential."

Organisations are recognising the value of data. Now it's seen as a resourceful asset and something that can be used to affect business change.

Michael Campbell, AdviserPlus

In the last chapter we explored the value of using a workplace health strategy to set out in detail how



to proactively boost the health and happiness of employees and reduce absence as a result.

Michael believes that the data should be used to inform that strategy, but believes that data is only one part of the picture and should lay the foundations for a thorough understanding of the people in an organisation.

He said: "There's a point at which absence management technology fulfils its purpose – it's then about what you do with what it tells you.



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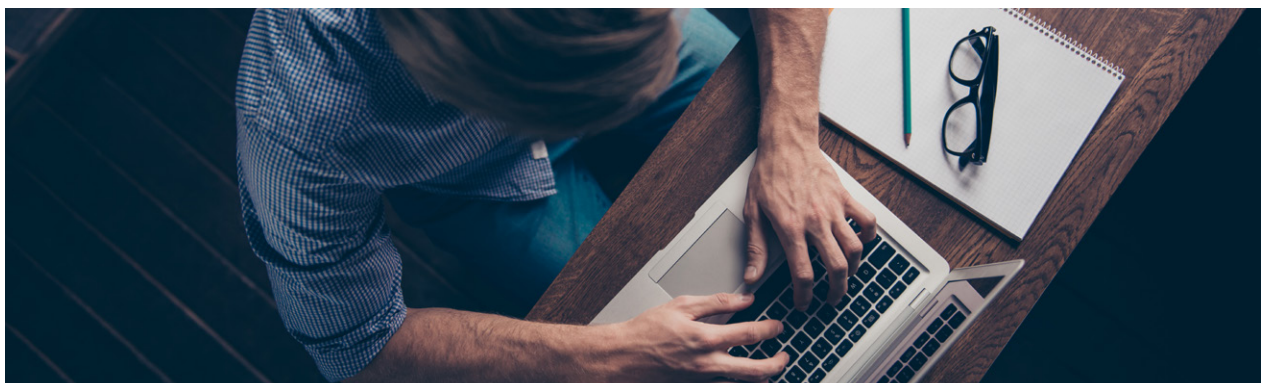
"I think the most important factor if you are accruing good data is developing the capability to take that data, consume it, understand it and play back what it's telling you.

"If organisations are serious about addressing or understanding their absenteeism, then analytics should form part of a wider strategy directed towards the wellbeing of its employees.

"There is a requirement for organisations to have a joined up strategy."

Businesses are becoming increasingly adept at collecting and storing the right data. The challenge now, it seems, is to understand what they want to do with this and to use it to inform a proactive strategy that can reduce the level of absenteeism.

It's also important not to forget the role of human beings. While technology can automate some of the administrative side of HR, there's always a need for human intuition when it comes to understanding and managing fellow people. Technology's role should be to make this side of the role easier and to free up people to be able to put their expertise to best use.



Lessons from absence trends

Do businesses suffer from a greater rate of absenteeism now than they did a decade ago? According to our survey respondents, the answer to this question is yes. 58.7% of the HR professionals we asked said that they felt employees take more sick days than they did ten years ago – although 57.19% said that they did not think there had been a rise in the last year.

However, that perception is wrong according to official figures. The Office for National Statistics found that the number of days lost to sickness in the UK in 2017 was just 4.1 per worker, the lowest on record and well down on 5.6 from 2007.

The number of days lost to sickness per worker in the UK:

1993 – 7.2	2006 – 5.5
1994 – 6.8	2007 – 5.6
1995 – 7.2	2008 – 5.3
1996 – 6.8	2009 – 5.0
1997 – 6.9	2010 – 4.7
1998 – 6.7	2011 – 4.5
1999 – 6.8	2012 – 4.5
2000 – 6.5	2013 – 4.4
2001 – 6.5	2014 – 4.4
2002 – 6.3	2015 – 4.4
2003 – 6.3	2016 – 4.3
2004 – 5.9	2017 – 4.1
2005 – 5.7	

There are two things that are important to consider here – why has this fallen, and why do people perceive that it hasn't?

Why have sickness rates fallen?

The fall in the last decade may well, at least in part, be explained by the financial crisis and the reaction to this. In an age of austerity, workers might well have felt less secure about their employment and nervous about taking time off, especially if they have been on zero hour contracts.

This has, according to Sir Cary Cooper of Manchester Business School, meant that the problem of presenteeism has mushroomed – and that part of the reduction in sick days comes from people who dragged themselves into work when they were actually ill.

He told the Guardian: "Sickness absence is low because presenteeism is high. Given the aftermath of the recession and with Brexit looming people are frightened to be off ill, so they show 'face time' when ill or feeling low or job dissatisfied.



Sickness absence is low because presenteeism is high.

Sir Cary Cooper, Manchester Business School



"They do not want high levels of absenteeism on their HR record, which they feel will make them vulnerable."

Presenteeism is a hidden danger that people in HR need to be acutely aware of. If people do come to work when they are actually ill, it might be a sign that they feel stressed or under undue pressure to meet their targets – and it might only serve to spread germs throughout their team and increase absences among their colleagues.

While this might have been a factor however, there might well also be other cultural changes that have impacted on absence. [One in seven people in the UK](#) are now a member of a gym, for example, and healthy eating and good habits are popular – fuelled by Instagram influencers and celebrities.

It's also worth noting that some of the things we have explored in this report have started to have an impact, with some businesses focusing on how they can improve their workplace environment and many offering flexitime. On top of that, mental health is starting to become less of a taboo – and people are receiving help to try to stop a condition from becoming too much to cope with.

The reasons for absenteeism perceptions

So, why might people presume the problem is worse than it is?

Perhaps it's partly down to the stereotypes which persist for the millennials who have been entering the workplace over that time.

The tired cliché suggests that younger workers are lazier, suffer from a sense of entitlement and don't feel loyalty to one job. Yet much of this seems to be based more on a crude broad brush assumption than any particular evidence. The BBC, for example, showed that millennials are certainly [not flitting between jobs](#) at any great rate and actually value the stability of a steady job.

A [study from Ipsos MORI](#) tackled many of the myths surrounding millennials in the workplace and found: "The assertion that Millennials are a new breed, presenting employers with new challenges – and usually the sole focus is on challenges – has spawned

an industry whose lifeblood appears to be offering listicles of the best way to 'manage Millennials'.

"However, any serious study in the area suggests that there are very limited differences in attitude, motivation and loyalty in the workplace between Millennials and the rest of us.



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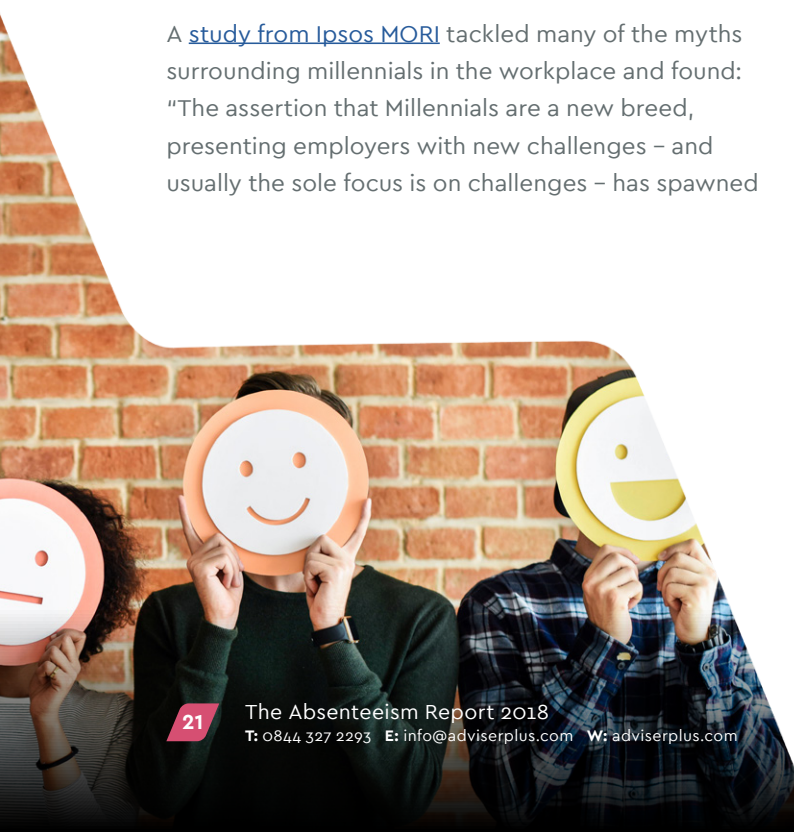
Ipsos MORI, Millennial Myths and Realities

"The differences that do exist can be more clearly assigned to life stage – Millennials are young, and they behave like all young people in work did before them. On the face of it, 'Millennials aren't so different after all' may feel like a slightly disappointing finding (and may explain why we're so keen to find differences in the first place), but it does present clear implications for employers of all shapes and sizes.

"The key point is that Millennials don't need to be treated differently to previous generations at the same stage in their careers. They are looking for the same things – reward for their efforts, the opportunity for personal growth, and management that cares about staff – and are just as motivated to work as Generation X were at the same point."

Best practice in HR should always be to assess the evidence and not rely on assumptions. This perhaps shows why this is the case – and that departments shouldn't fall in to a stereotype trap when it comes to explaining absence and trends.

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While the overall rate of sickness in the UK may be down, that doesn't necessarily mean it will automatically come down in your business. Indeed, as we've seen at the very start of this report, almost one in five of the people we surveyed said the average employee in their organisation took seven or more sick days over a year – meaning that they have absence rates far above the current average and more in line with those seen in the UK in the early 1990s.

Plus, as we've seen, the matter of presenteeism can mean that a falling rate isn't always as positive as it seems.

As for the future, it's impossible to say what comes next. Yet, as more and more businesses embed best practice and use data to inform a strategic and proactive approach to absence, they should expect to reap the rewards. No matter what challenges the next wave of technology brings – and automation could change the workplace and HR drastically – having this best practice in place will be important in effectively looking after the people in an organisation and easing the issue of absenteeism.



Our conclusion

There's clearly a lot for businesses to consider within the broad topic of absenteeism. We've covered some of the key aspects – looking at the attitudes among HR professionals as they stand in 2018, exploring the reasons for the results of our survey and looking at what, if anything, needs to change to improve.

All of that means there's much food for thought for people in HR – and scope for improvement in the majority of businesses.

Companies can see, however, that being proactive and progressive helps both the health and happiness of their employees and that the benefits of this will be felt in economic terms.

Do you need some help with managing the people in your workforce? Whether you want to track absence more effectively or make the move to predictive analytics, [speak to us](#) and see how we can help.

1. Finding creative ways to boost the workplace environment can be a proactive way to reduce absenteeism.
2. There are three key ingredients to back to work interviews that all line managers need to understand and act upon in order to make them a success.
3. Businesses have to guard against 'leaveism' and do what they can to keep their employees' holiday work-free as this can contribute to absence in the long run.
4. Flexible working patterns are becoming the hallmark of a progressive employer and can contribute to a reduction in absenteeism if managed and implemented carefully.
5. A failure to have a workplace health strategy can cause businesses to be stuck solely in a reactive setting and will mean that they don't see the benefits of a holistic approach.
6. Companies need to migrate to a position in which they use technology at their disposal, and the data it provides, in a proactive way.
7. Absence trends generally are going down – despite perceptions among some people and stereotypes that stick to modern workers.