

# HEALTH PROMOTION AND PREVENTION OF ABSENTEEISM : EMPLOYERS ARE UNDER MOUNTING PRESSURE

Sickness absences cost money! Not only for Social Security, that's obvious, but also for the companies themselves due to the absolutely monumental direct and indirect costs. Today, the generous sick-leave benefits enjoyed by staff are no longer under attack. Times have changed. Several studies have now come out pointing the finger at employers and linking absenteeism to well-being in the workplace. For the moment, most French companies have not latched onto this. So, are they the real culprits?

## **Yes, sickness absences are costing Social Security ever more money...**

Then in June 2018 it was calculated that Social Security Daily Benefits (IJSS in French) were costing €10.4bn over 12 months, up 4% each year between 2013 and 2018. According to a Malakoff Médéric study, this rise is mainly due to long-term sick leave: up 10% since 2012. Their impact is colossal. Although sickness absences of more than a month only represent 13% of medical certificates, they make up 71% of sick-leave days. A study by CNAM (the sickness insurance fund) has put new light on this issue. They have concluded that the main cause for these new trends is the rise in retirement age. The rate of employment for 55 to 64 year olds in the population has, indeed, risen considerably since 2010. Of course, this age group is more likely to take sick leave than the rest of the population. QED.

## **...but this is also very expensive for companies!**

The 10<sup>th</sup> Absenteeism Barometer published by Ayming, confirms this trend. In 2017, absenteeism represented 4.72% of total working days in private-sector companies i.e. 17.2 days off per staff member. An ever-rising trend. Iseor (a research centre in socio-economic management) has set out to estimate the hidden costs of absenteeism for companies. By aggregating the remuneration paid to absent staff by virtue of current agreements plus the "value" not produced plus the costs incurred by the company due to the staff member's absence, the study arrived at a per capita annual cost of €3,521. If we apply this calculation to the entire working population, this would mean that absenteeism costs €108bn, i.e. 10 times the cost of IJSS benefits! And the icing on the cake: Iseor

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argues that only one third of sick leave is unavoidable. And the other two-thirds? According to the research institute Sapiens, the remaining two-thirds are due to deteriorating working conditions and work arrangements, or put another way, management failures. Employers are the main victims of absenteeism but they do have their share of responsibility.

## **Prevention is the objective...forced upon them, if need be**

Are these figures 100% reliable? It is easy to cast doubts, point to context and even show up varied interpretations: the CNAM points to ageing of the working population whereas Sapiens and Iseor talk about the need for better working conditions and reinventing management methods...but this misses the point. A number of reports and studies invoke, more or less explicitly, the responsibility of employers. The recent Charlotte Lecoq report on workplace health points a finger at the shortfalls in health promotion in companies. There is a growing consensus around the idea that employers should tackle this issue. Even though absenteeism is a matter of concern for 56% of managers, too few companies have really put in place a coherent strategy for improving the quality of life at work. Since appealing to employers' better nature has not worked, it's a safe bet that the next measures taken on this issue will not shy away from hitting the pockets of those companies who perform the least in terms of health promotion. Thinking, at least, is going more and more down that route.

## **Are employers really the only culprits?**

Although employers have their share of responsibility when it come to absenteeism, what about other the causes that weigh on an employee, such as work-life balance. Stress or anxiety linked to causes outside a person's workplace can also generate absenteeism. In order to ensure staff are at their workplace, employers, paradoxically, find they have to offer solutions to help manage employees' personal issues.

Take a look, for example, at journey times and hassle when using public transport, particularly in the Paris area, a source of stress for staff that means they sometimes come to work already exhausted after having pushed and shoved to get a few square inches of space in a crowded underground train. Don't the public authorities have their share of responsibility in all this?

## **What are the solutions open to employers?**

As a prime mover in social protection for 30 years, Gerep has clearly identified the challenges faced

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by its clients, who, under very little regulatory constraint, have above all the desire to create a strong employer "brand-image" in order to recruit the best talents, and to engage their employees.

For more information on absenteeism and some robust initiatives to accompany the implementation of Quality of Working Life solutions, take a look at [our QWL white paper downloadable here](#).

Damien Vieillard-Baron

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