



Information Overload

Issue 39, November 2005

Welcome:

Welcome to this month's edition of Information Overload. This month we take a look at the interesting issue of absenteeism, and the costs to an organisation. Is it just the bottom line that suffers, or are there other issues to consider?

I would like to thank you in advance for forwarding this edition onto friends, colleagues, and other interested readers. If you don't receive this newsletter directly and would like to do so, please send a blank email to training@iea.com.au with subscribe newsletter in the subject line.

Please note that all back issues of this edition, as well as our registrant resources edition can be read and/or downloaded from our web site – <http://www.iea.com.au> should any of the topics be of interest and use. If you have any suggestions or would like to see us cover any other topics, we would love to hear from you. Just send an e-mail to training@iea.com.au;

Lorraine Bradshaw
Marketing Coordinator

In this Issue we will be looking at:

- Is work making you sick? Or are you just sick of work?
- Moving on or staying put: weighing up the possibilities
- Absenteeism, the biggest indicator
- Managing the problem(s)
- A Thought to ponder.

Is work making you sick? Or are you just sick of work?

According to Beyond Blue – the national depression initiative (<http://www.beyondblue.org.au>) one in 5 Australians experience some form of mental health problem, including anxiety and depression. Whilst this figure alone is staggering, it is said that depression on its own accounts for over 6 million working days lost each year in Australia, and costs the Australian economy \$4.6 billion annually.

One study of healthcare workers in the US found that when employees were working for a boss they disliked, they had significantly higher blood pressure. According to British scientist George Fieldman, this boss-induced hypertension could increase the risk of coronary heart disease by one-sixth and the risk of stroke by one-third. Large studies, such as the "Whitehall study", have already shown that people who work at the bottom of an organisational hierarchy are much more likely to develop coronary heart disease. But the

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Information Enterprises Australia Pty Ltd
Unit 4, Upper Level, 201 High Street, FREMANTLE WA 6160
Tel: 08 9335 2533 Fax: 08 9335 2544 e-mail: training@iea.com.au

new research suggests that the relationship between the employee and boss may be pivotal in employees' long-term health.

(Bhattachaya, S. *Unfair bosses make blood pressure soar*. (2003, June). *NewScientist.com* – <http://www.newscientist.com/news/news.jsp?id=ns99993863>.

So does that mean we should go and work for a boss we like? According to the US Department of Labour, the number one reason people leave their jobs is because they do not feel appreciated. (Thiesen, T, 2003, March 25). *Recognizing all staff members is an important task*. *Lincoln Journal Star*, p.4A. If workers are disengaged to such a point that they dislike going to work, dislike the people they are working with and working for, is it any wonder so many people are suffering anxiety and depression.

Moving on or staying put: Weighing up the possibilities

Whilst changing jobs can be seen to be a little extreme in combating this kind of problem, it is one that is used by people who feel they are left with no other choice. However, before you decide to chuck it all in and find an organisation who does appreciate your skills and talents, you might like to ask yourself a couple of questions.

- What are the benefits of staying where you are?
 - Is it comfortable, after all you know the people, you know the job; there is a possibility you can take on other duties or take on project work, especially if boredom is a factor.
 - Are you close to retirement and don't want the hassle of learning something totally new if you are going to be leaving the work force in a few years?
 - Is the job close to home?
 - Is the money good?
 - What are your job prospects within the company?
 - Can you move to a different department or different location?
 - Have you spoken to anyone within the company about your concerns?
 - Have you sought outside help?

- Do you have any other job prospects that would suit you better than the one you are currently doing?
- Have you started looking for alternatives yet?
- Or do you hope that the problem will just go away?

Absenteeism, the biggest indicator

So how can you tell if this is a problem within your organisation? Whilst gritted teeth, backstabbing, white-anting and other forms of office politics are some of the not so subtle signs people display whenever they speak to one another, there are some other clues to consider. And the easiest one to measure is absenteeism.

Absenteeism is a major barometer of employee morale in any organisation, absenteeism above 5% per week is considered to be very serious, 3% is the standard goal of industry.

2003 GCH Unscheduled Absence

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Accurately tracking employee absenteeism is important because it allows an employer to gain insight into the root causes of unscheduled absences. Depending on your work environment, the following may be useful to track:

- The incidence of absence (such as seasonal or Monday/ Friday absences);
- The type of absence (such as sick leave or annual leave);
- The reason for the absences (Keeping a record of the reasons staff give for absence can help companies identify common threads).
- Individual employee absence history;
- The average duration of absence; and
- The dollar costs of absence.

Having a clear picture of who's absent and why can help team leaders to plan more efficiently. Managers can look at what work is affected, how critical it is and what they need to do to plug the gap.

Whilst collecting this kind of information is a useful part of managing absenteeism, it's what you do with the information that is vital. If collecting the data is used as a way of reducing staff numbers, staff morale may be reduced further than it currently is. If however, you use the data to try and find the root causes of the problems within your organisation, then you may find a whole host of other problems that need to be addressed, and therein lies the problem.

Absenteeism is as we have discussed an excellent indication of the overall health of an organisation. If your organisation is not doing very well, chances are high that your absentee rates will be high as well. Another good indication is whether people are achieving their goals and objectives or are people simply doing enough to get by? If managers have at least some understanding of the nature of an employee's problem, they can make sure appropriate help and support is made available immediately.

Managing the problem(s)

I'm sure we have all worked in organisations where one or two people made a difference to the morale of the rest of the staff, and these people usually impacted in a negative way. If they were having a "bad day" then you all knew about it. Of course there are a whole host of reasons why people have a "bad day". It could be because they are not feeling well, or a loved one is sick, and they have chosen not to disclose the information to anyone. It could be because they are being bullied either at home or work and this is their method of coping.

In a recent study, the impact that a single employee can have on the morale and bottom line of an organisation was undertaken. 4,853 call centre operatives from a major US telecommunications were monitored, and found 3 service representatives who upset every single customer they spoke to in a given day. What was even more interesting was that those customers never returned. It was noted by the authors that the company would have been better off paying those three people to stay at home. *Rath, T and Clifton D.O: How full is your bucket: Positive strategies for work and life, Gallup Press, NY, 2004 pp39.*

As you can appreciate organisational culture will play an important part in deciding what steps to take in managing this kind of person and their behaviour.

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Is this kind of behaviour “normal” for this person. If this is the case, then moving the person to another part of the organisation would simply move the “problem” with them, and upset a whole new part of the workforce.

Is the person in a position of seniority within the organisation? It is an interesting fact that the more people who directly report to a person, the more chances there are of alienating that particular part of the workforce. If managers and leaders lead by example, is the problem passed through the entire structure of the organisation, with the “little guy” at the end suffering the most?

In this particular instance - who on earth do you report the problem to?

And if you do, would you be victimised?

Other things to consider when managing absences is to ensure:

- You have a good working environment, with good occupational health and safety practices to avoid workplace injuries;
- Provide flexible work practices, such as job sharing, flexible working hours and working from home where possible to allow people to care for elderly or sick relatives, and/or look after children;
- Provide additional training to those people who manage or supervise other employees, so that problems that have been identified can be dealt with.

A T hought to Ponder:

“In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing is to do nothing”

Theodore Roosevelt, 1858-1919

President of the United States of America

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