

# *7 Top Tips for Minimising Sickness Absence*

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## Introduction

Welcome to your free copy of '7 Top Tips for Minimising Sickness Absence'.

As the owner or manager of a business, we're sure you'll know that sickness absence can have a massive impact on your bottom line if it isn't managed effectively. In 2012, the CBI Absence Survey found that the annual cost of absence is a huge £17 billion for the UK economy, and many organisations have found that it can become a real problem if they don't have the appropriate policies and procedures in place. After all, every boss wants to ensure that they have a workforce that is present and productive.

At Peopletime we have over 9 years of experience as an established company working with businesses just like yours to help them get the most out of their staff and minimise sickness absence. Having assisted businesses with creating the right foundations for HR success, we've learned a lot along the way, and we know what works and what doesn't in terms of sickness management.

In this guide, we've included 7 top tips for minimising sickness absence within the workplace. They're easy to understand and implement in your own business, and we know that if you take action in these key areas, you'll notice a massive difference.

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# 1. Have a sickness absence policy, and make sure it's clearly communicated

Do you have a formal sickness absence policy in your workplace, and is it clearly communicated to your staff? If not, this should be your very first starting point. By having a policy that clearly details what is expected of your staff when they need to take time off work, you're sending the message that you take absence seriously and will take the necessary steps to help people get back into work.

You might want to consider including the following elements in your policy:

- How the employee should notify you if they are ill, or are going to be absent from work for other emergency reasons, e.g. because a dependent has fallen ill or had had an accident. It may be useful here to explicitly state that dependents leave would only be granted if an emergency situation has arisen
- At what point the employee should submit a medical statement from their doctor or self-certify their illness, and the associated implications of failing to provide the appropriate certification. Your staff should be allowed to self-certify if their absence is seven days or less
- Statutory, and any contractual, sick pay arrangements. This should also be covered in each employee's written statement of employment details, that they're issued with when they first start work
- Your provisions for the return-to-work interview (further details of this are discussed further on in this guide)
- The consequences of not complying with the policy, including when disciplinary action may be taken
- Who is responsible for keeping attendance records in your workplace

- Reference to any other relevant people policies within your business, e.g. alcohol/drug misuse, health and safety, discipline and grievance, annual leave, etc.

Though the policy document itself is important, there are several steps that you can take to ensure that it's successful within your workplace. These include:

- Discussing and agreeing the content of the policy with trade union representatives, or any employee representation groups relevant to your business
- Piloting the policy, or at least inviting feedback from staff members before implementation
- Ensuring that the policy is written in plain and simple language, free from any jargon or technical terms
- Setting a date for when the policy will be reviewed. Employment law or the needs of your business may change, so it makes sense to set a date for review well in advance

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## 2. Give your line managers the necessary skills and knowledge to implement sickness policies

It's likely that the responsibility for the implementation of your sickness absence policy will fall with your line managers, so it's important that they have the skills and knowledge to handle the day-to-day considerations.

Start by going back to basics and ask yourself whether your key members of staff have had the training they need to deal with people issues. Could you roll out some new training to bring them up to scratch? Do they need a reminder of the key points of the policies? How could you embed their people management duties into their everyday work practices and make them accountable accordingly? You might want to consider adding management tasks into their performance reviews, so you can assess their abilities and provide any extra help as necessary.

Remember though, it's often all too easy to fall into the trap of making your people activities just a tick-box exercise. It requires a real commitment if you want to change the culture of your business and make strides forward. The benefits though can be huge, including a reduction in sickness absence.

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## 3. Always consider return-to-work provisions

It's advisable to have return-to-work provisions in place so any employees who have taken time off, whether it's one day or one year, can be given the appropriate support when they return to the workplace. The exact document will look different from one business to another, but you should consider including the following things:

- Your organisation's commitment to helping employees return to work after a period of sickness absence
- Your organisation's commitment to make reasonable adjustments to retain an employee who has become disabled or whose disability has worsened so they are not put at a substantial disadvantage in their job
- Your organisation's commitment to ensuring that employees that have suffered ill health, injury or disability will be treated fairly and equally
- Provisions of time off to help employees return to work, or to attend any necessary medical appointments
- Practical arrangements for return to work interviews

Again, take the necessary steps to ensure that the policy is successful in your workplace. It requires communication, the buy-in of all parties, and regular reviews.

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## 4. Ask yourself whether flexible working is possible within your business

Flexible working can be a fantastic benefit to offer to your employees, and the impact can be far-reaching. Not only can it help to minimise sickness absence, but it can also have a positive effect on staff retention, motivation, and engagement. Of course, in some businesses, flexible working policies can be hard to implement. If you're running a retail operation, for example, there's no escaping the fact that you need staff manning your tills and serving customers at certain times of the day. Where possible though, it's well worthwhile to consider how it could work for your business.

In practice, flexible working policies could include the following for your members of staff:

- Job sharing (where two people will do one job, splitting the hours between them)
- Working from home (giving your employees the opportunity to carry out their work outside of the office or usual work setting)
- Compressed hours (working full-time hours over fewer days)
- Flexitime (where employees choose what times they start and finish, though must work certain 'core hours', e.g. between 10am and 4pm)
- Phased retirement (where older workers reduce their working hours in the run up to their retirement. It's worth noting here that compulsory retirement has been phased out, so employees can choose when they want to retire)

If you're unsure, why not hold a consultation meeting with your staff to discuss how flexible working could be implemented? Involving employees is brilliant for morale, and you could unearth some great ideas for making the work environment more productive.

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## 5. Ensure your staff have the training they need before operating equipment

You're legally obliged to carry out a health and safety assessment in your workplace, to identify any potential hazards. Whilst this basic requirement needs to be carried out without question, many businesses aren't taking the next step. By pinpointing any potential problems for the future, you could massively reduce the risk of long-term sickness absence.

Consider whether there are any existing problems that have resulted from the use of your equipment or machinery, and pinpoint any areas that could become a problem in the future. Remember, this doesn't apply only to industrial businesses – even sitting at an office chair all day could cause issues in terms of repetitive strain injury, etc.

Health and safety assessments and training are one of the services that we offer at Peopletime so do have a look at our health and safety pages (<http://www.peopletime.co.uk/health-and-safety/>) or get in touch if this is something you would like to explore further.

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## 6. Consider the introduction of a benefits package that includes healthcare

Increasing pressures on the NHS mean that if your staff are suffering from an illness or condition that many lead to time off work, they could be looking at a significant waiting period before they get the specialist help that they need. If you find that this is causing your business problems, you might want to consider whether you could add a private healthcare option into your benefits package.

Of course, offering assistance with private healthcare will involve the investment of time and money, and it certainly isn't a viable option for every business. That said though, be sure to fully weigh up the implications before writing the idea off. Though there will be an initial cost, it could have a huge positive impact on sickness absence, retention, and even the acquisition of top talent for your business.

If this seems like too big of a commitment for your business at the moment, you could consider simply adding discounted or free gym membership to your benefits package. Allowing your staff to burn off excess stress and keep in good shape has obvious benefits for business.

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## 7. Reward low absence rates

Many businesses have successfully implemented a reward programme for low absence rates. The premise here is fairly simple – members of staff with low absence rates receive a reward, in the form of extra holiday entitlement, a cash bonus, or anything else that you feel would motivate your team.

Before implementing a scheme like this though, it pays to get advice from an HR or legal professional. You must be careful to not disadvantage staff who have to take time off due to a disability or pregnancy, and both of these groups are protected under the law.

There's also the valid consideration here that it could encourage staff who are genuinely unwell to turn up to work – which could have a knock-on impact on the rest of the workforce, and even create a sickness absence problem in itself. Again, weigh up all the pros and cons, and consider professional advice, before making any decisions.

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## A final note...

We hope that you've found this guide useful, and that it's given you plenty of inspiration for how you can manage sickness absence more effectively in your business. Some of the steps are easier than others to implement, but the most important thing is that you do take stock and ultimately take action. Nipping any problems in the bud as soon as possible will prevent them from becoming deeply engrained in the culture of your organisation.

If you feel like sickness absence is becoming a real problem within your business, or you're keen to ensure that you have the right policies and procedures in place for the future, it pays to seek professional advice. As Peopletime provide HR advice, we can help with any aspect of the process, whether it's simply new policy creation, or handling a complex case. ***For further information browse our website ([www.peopletime.co.uk](http://www.peopletime.co.uk)) give Peopletime a call on 0845 127 1360 or send an email to [info@peopletime.co.uk](mailto:info@peopletime.co.uk).***

If you've found this guide helpful, please recommend it to any of your contacts who might be looking at how to minimise sickness absence within their businesses. They can download their very own copy from our website.

Wishing you success,

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