



## Combating Presenteeism During Flu Season

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With this year's flu season just starting, employers are increasingly concerned about the risk sick employees pose to the workplace, according to the findings of the 2005 CCH Unscheduled Absence Survey.

According to the CCH survey, 48 percent of employers surveyed report "presenteeism" — where employees come to work when they are ill — is a problem in their organization, up from 39 percent in 2004.

As those who catch the flu also spread the virus, CCH, a provider of human resources and employment law information and software, suggests employers act now to combat presenteeism in the coming months.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 5 percent to 20 percent of the U.S. population suffers through the flu each season, and that individuals who get the flu may infect others from the day before their symptoms develop, to five days after becoming sick.

As the flu season gets into full swing, companies need to discourage "hero workers" from showing up for a full-day's work despite flu symptoms because of the potential for jeopardizing the health and productivity of their colleagues. Employers should emphasize to employees that while they need them at work, they first want a healthy workplace.

CCH workplace analyst Lisa Franke recommends employees follow the common-sense rule of staying home when they are sick and that employers encourage this behavior.

Unfortunately, some traditional absence-control and sick-day policies may inadvertently encourage presenteeism. For example, organizations that adhere to traditional sick-day policies, and take disciplinary action to enforce them, may make it difficult for employees to do the right thing.

According to the CCH survey, disciplinary action is the single-most common absence-control program, used by 90 percent of organizations surveyed.

"For instance, if an employer allots five sick days a year to each employee and takes disciplinary action on the sixth absence day, an employee who has been out with the flu for several days may choose to come into work while still ill rather than face disciplinary action," Franke says.

"This is especially true at the beginning of the year — the height of flu season in many parts of the country — when employees are concerned about depleting all of their allowed leave in just a month or two."

While some employees may be able to offset the risk of a poor health year if their employer allows them to carry over the sick days, the CCH survey found that the number of employers allowing employees to carry over sick time from one year to the next has dropped from 51 percent in 2000 to 38 percent in 2005.

### Discouraging Sick Workers

Employers are taking numerous steps to remedy the problem of presenteeism. Over three-fifths (62 percent) of companies that think presenteeism is a problem combat the issue by

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sending sick employees home; 41 percent educate employees on the importance of staying home when they are sick; 36 percent foster a culture that discourages workers from coming in sick; 22 percent permit employees to telecommute when they are sick; and 5 percent report they give employees an unlimited number of sick days.

Having a Paid Leave Bank, also known as Paid Time Off (PTO), program in place can also help employees deal with various health and personal issues that arise from year to year.

According to the CCH survey, 67 percent of employers offer a PTO program, under which personal, vacation and sick days are combined into a single bank of days that the employee can use in any way he or she needs.

"With a PTO program, employees have more discretion on how to use their time off. So if they're ill, they can take a day from their PTO bank and stay home, without the fear of being reprimanded or running out of sick days at the beginning of the year," Franke said.

Employers also seem to be getting serious about flu prevention, with 61 percent of organizations surveyed sponsoring flu-shot programs for employees.

### Tips for Employers

Among the steps employers can take to help ensure a healthier workplace and minimize flu season disruptions:

- Foster a healthy environment: Speak with managers to ensure they're fostering an environment that makes ill employees comfortable to ask to leave the workplace or, better yet, not report to work in the first place.
- Set a good example: Sick managers should be urged not to show up at the workplace as employees may otherwise simply view the message to stay home as lip service.
- Set guidelines and make them visible to employees: Help them understand under what conditions they should stay home, and when it's safe to return to work.
- Revisit your employee assistance program and health-care support services: Determine if there is a hotline or Web site through which you can communicate to your employees on taking care of their health during flu season and getting more information about related health-care issues
- Review absence-control policies to ensure they are not counterproductive: Programs such as disciplinary action need to be assessed to ensure they are not making ill employees feel required to report to work.
- Post helpful tips on how to avoid spreading germs, with guidance offered on the CDC web site. Use posters, or offer the information on your corporate intranet.
- Work with your employees and facilities group to keep common areas clean: Make sure that common areas of the facilities are cleaned regularly; this may even include cleaning conference rooms between meetings.
- Recognize helpful employees: Consider bonuses, rewards or some other type of recognition for employees who step in to help do extra work for ill colleagues.

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