

APPOINTMENTS

Take time off from the bane of sickies

Sickies can cost firms millions, so offering 'duvet days' can boost profits, writes Gabrielle Monaghan

WORKERS eager for a lie-in are increasingly wary of calling in sick with run-of-the-mill mutterings about having eaten a bad curry or suffering from a migraine.

Websites such as Pullasickie.com offer more inventive get-out clauses, suggesting lying on a bed with your head hanging off the side to perfect a masally, blocked-up phone voice to describe your flu symptoms. A riskier strategy in the UK involves ordering a fake sick note, complete with a real doctor's name and NHS headed paper, from Doctorsnotestore.com.

While firms frowned on workers who frequently pulled "sickies", real or imaginary, during the boom years, such actions can have more serious consequences in times like these. The global economic slowdown is putting companies under pressure to achieve the same results with fewer staff, and employees who develop a reputation for calling in sick could find themselves first out if redundancies are on the cards.

"Right now, your nose needs to be squeaky clean," said Rowan Manahan, managing director of Fortify Services, a career management firm. "It's fascinating to hear employers talk about why they are holding on to some people and letting others go. In many instances they are cutting out the dead wood and anyone who thinks otherwise is living in Peter Pan land."

Employers often list absenteeism as the biggest problem they face in

the day-to-day running of their businesses, HR experts say. Consider the fury Sir Alan Sugar expressed this summer when Lee McQueen, the winner of the last BBC series of The Apprentice, called in sick on his first day at work in a €130,000-a-year job with the British tycoon.

"Employees often don't realise the impact taking unscheduled time off can have, not just on a business but on the colleagues who have to take up the slack," said Brenda Boal, an employee communications expert at Inside Edge, a global communications consultancy that recently opened an office in Dublin.

Indeed, absenteeism costs small businesses in Ireland an average €793m a year, according to a survey by the Small Firms Association (SFA). The overall cost would rise to more than €1 billion if the SFA included the cost of replacing absent staff with other workers or overtime payments, medical referrals, the effect on productivity and quality, increased work pressure on other colleagues and the administration time spent on managing absences, according to Avine McNally, the SFA's assistant director.

Another survey, conducted by the Confederation of British Industry and AXA, the insurer, found that seven out of 10 employers believed staff liked to "extend" their weekend, while 39% said possible fake illness claims coincided with events such as big sporting tournaments.

Workers are also very likely to call in sick after holidays. More than a quarter of British workers admitted they had taken an unscheduled day off work to get over their break, research by Travelsupermarket.com found. The most popular excuse was a fake illness, such as food poisoning or sunstroke, while one in eight workers claimed they had missed a flight or their flight was delayed.

In Ireland, employees are absent for an average of eight days a year, rising to 10 days at large firms, according to the SFA. Minor illness is the most common reason given for short-term, uncertified absences, followed by home responsibilities and personal problems.

But conspicuous by its absence from the figures is how much businesses earn from employees who work overtime without being paid, take work home or spend weekends at the office finishing projects. Career experts argue that more Irish employers should introduce the practice of "duvet days", which are common in America and Canada, to compensate hard workers for putting in the extra effort.

This would involve giving employees a number of unscheduled paid days off, usually four days taken from annual leave. Companies would also benefit: research shows that rewarding employees with an occasional lie-in can reduce staff turnover, boost morale and improve profits.

"It's more difficult for an employer to argue against duvet days if people are working longer hours than they should," said Manahan. "In our work-hard, play-hard culture, most people work more than 37½ hours a week and feel entitled to the odd day off on top of their holidays."

Managers who assume a worker who wants a "duvet day" — sometimes dubbed a "mental health day" — is lazy may be blinkered in their views, according to a poll of more than 1,000 workers by ComPsych, a Chicago-based provider of employee assistance programmes.

Most workers who take an unplanned day off when they are not physically ill do so because they need to re-energise themselves, are stressed, or are in the midst of a family or relationship crisis, the survey found. Relationship problems are consistently among the top two reasons for calls to employee assistance programmes, ComPsych found.

Employers, therefore, need to foster greater trust between managers and staff by allowing employees the odd day off at short notice if they are tired or have a crisis to attend to.

One in three Irish workers "actively distrusts" their employer, according to a survey of 400 employees released by Inside Edge this week. This suspicion, fuelled by a lack of communication, causes apathy, stress and illness, all of which cut a company's productivity.

On the other hand, creating an environment where employees feel they can be open with their employers reaps much greater rewards, says Fergal Brosnan, director of Cork-based Berkley Recruitment.

"We have invested heavily in IT systems, so if someone is sick or their child is sick, they can work remotely or from home and this way we get 60% productivity rather than 0%," said Brosnan. "If staff are forced to be away from the office, they tend to come in on Saturdays or work late to make up the lost hours. The more mature, open and flexible an employer is, the more you get back."



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