

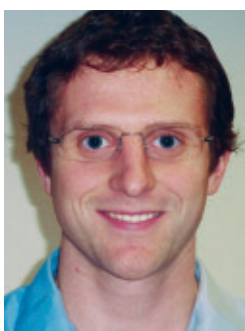
All present but not necessarily correct

Staff who insist on struggling into work despite being ill are doing themselves and their organisations more harm than good, say **Nick Hayter** and **Matt Smeed**, who argue that employers should do more to tackle the trend of presenteeism

“

The estimated annual cost of presenteeism in terms of lost productivity is £966m in the UK. This compares with the estimate of the cost of absenteeism – only £750m per year

”



Nick Hayter, left, and Matt Smeed, of Robertson Cooper Ltd



Steve Boorman's final NHS Staff Health and Wellbeing review will be submitted to the Secretary of State for Health this month. The main message is that reducing absenteeism is an urgent requirement for many public sector organisations. However, we want to focus on a related concept – presenteeism.

Presenteeism is a relatively new concept that has developed as a result of concerted efforts to improve workplace wellbeing. The generally accepted definition of presenteeism is “turning up to work while ill”. In addition to this, however, it is possible to see both absenteeism and presenteeism as being inherently connected to the concept of employee engagement. A lack of engagement can cause people to stay off sick even when they may be well enough to go to work, but it is also an outcome that is inextricably linked with presenteeism. Employees who exhibit presenteeism are, by definition, disengaged.

When presenteeism is well managed you usually find a culture in which staff know when they should stay at home – both for their own good and that of their colleagues. The potential difficulty is that at first glance it seems to advocate exchanging presenteeism for an increase in absenteeism. However there is growing evidence that, in some circumstances, choosing to be absent is actually more beneficial to the individual, the team and the organisation. So tackling presenteeism in the short term can have a significant positive impact on absenteeism in the long term.

The growth of research into presenteeism derives largely from revelations about the costs related to it. The government's Foresight project on mental capital and wellbeing estimates the annual cost of presenteeism in terms of lost productivity to be £966m in the UK. This is compared with their estimate of the cost of absenteeism – only £750m per year. This gap in cost is even more striking when you think about the level of resources dedicated to managing absence in UK organisations versus those explicitly allocated to presenteeism.

Costs start to mount when an employee decides to come to work while ill. He or she is then likely to be working less productively for a number of days and may make more mistakes as a result. The recovery process is extended and sick leave may eventually be taken anyway. In addition, when it comes to seasonal flu an unwell employee is likely to infect co-workers, causing costs to spiral. This lost productivity is not easy to record, but it clearly has a significant impact.

ASSET, Robertson Cooper's employee engagement and wellbeing survey tool, provides some insight into how prevalent presenteeism might be. By combining responses to existing questions relating to health and sick leave taken we were able to identify a set of employees who are exhibiting presenteeism. Drawing on a database of

responses from more than 35,000 public sector employees we looked for those who reported having sub-optimal health over the last three months, but with no days off due to sickness – this was the presenteeism group.

The results were striking. The sheer number of people who fell into the presenteeism group was surprisingly high – despite not being at full fitness, 26 per cent of the public sector sample reported taking no sick leave at all during their last three months at work. Less surprisingly, this group also reported lower productivity than their healthier colleagues – with just 37 per cent claiming their productivity was at 90 per cent or above, compared with 51 per cent of workers in the healthy group. A number of sources of pressure were also rated as much more troubling by the presenteeism group. In particular, they reported poorer work relationships, a worse work-life balance and more work overload than their healthy counterparts.

So what can actually be done to tackle presenteeism? Although the evidence demonstrates the potential negative effects of presenteeism on both productivity and wellbeing, it is not safe to assume that eliminating presenteeism will recoup all of these costs in the short term. This is because an immediate consequence of eliminating presenteeism will inevitably be higher levels of absenteeism. However, most organisations focus solely on reducing absenteeism and while this is an important outcome to consider, ignoring the costs of presenteeism excludes a key driver of productivity at work. All the evidence points to the fact that organisations have an opportunity to save money by intervening to reduce these hidden costs.

There are, in fact, several ways to improve the management of presenteeism. First, acknowledge the problem – consider using an audit or diagnostic tool to discover existing levels within your organisation. As an employer you need to know the size of the problem. Second, employees should be rewarded for the quality of work they deliver, not the hours they put in. This is chiefly about better management. Third, see investment in healthcare and improved wellbeing within an organisation as a short-term cost that will have a long-term positive impact on reducing presenteeism – prevention is always better than cure. This last point is about taking a strategic view.

Finding the right balance between absenteeism and presenteeism can be a challenge. However, by adopting a strategic perspective and finding the right level of each for your organisation it's possible to make significant savings in an area that has been, until now, under the radar of most UK organisations.

● **For a more in-depth discussion of how to manage presenteeism you can download Robertson Cooper's annual wellbeing report 2009/10 at www.robertsoncooper.com**