

## Solving Employee Attendance Problems

It is hard to believe, but employee absenteeism costs businesses literally billions of dollars each year. Unfortunately, our own welding supply industry impacts this huge waste of money since employee absenteeism issues are prevalent in every organization.

Managers everywhere have tried to attack the problem, with varying degrees of success. Many don't realize, however, that *they* can often be the key to their subordinates' attendance—good or bad. A national employee survey demonstrated that very fact. Employees were asked to complete a questionnaire that asked the following questions:

1. How do you feel about your working conditions?
2. How do you feel about the amount of work you are required to do?
3. How do you feel about your rate of pay?
4. How do you rate your immediate supervisor?
5. How many days were you absent last year?

The answers to the first four questions were then compared to question number five to determine whether there was any correlation.

### THE RESULTS ARE IN...

Surprisingly, the survey showed no correlation between the first three questions and employees' rates of absenteeism. It seemed that working conditions, workload, and pay had very little to do with whether employees showed up for work.

But when the answers to question number four were analyzed, there was a definite correlation between how employees felt about their supervisors and their absenteeism rates. Employees who rated their supervisors from fair to excellent had the best attendance, while employees who rated their supervisors from below average to poor had the worst attendance.

*What this means:* Managers play a key role in absenteeism control. Here are six steps you can take right away to make sure you're fulfilling that role.

1. Speak to employees immediately after an absence and find out the exact cause. Put the reasons in writing so you can keep track of employees' excuses and recognize patterns.
2. Make a special note of absences which follow a pattern, such as employees who are frequently absent on Mondays, Fridays, or following holidays.
3. Encourage employees to come in late, instead of not at all.
4. Let employees know they were missed, regardless of how legitimate their reasons were for being absent. Simple statements, such as "No one can do that job the way you can," let employees know they are a valued part of the team. It may also make those who took an unnecessary day off feel guilty—a good deterrent to similar behavior in the future.
5. Make sure employees understand that absenteeism has a negative impact on their performance appraisals, which will affect raises, promotions, and continued employment.
6. Point out to employees that good attendance means they should be on the job every day. Some employees believe that if they follow the notice provisions spelled out in company policy, their absences are excused. Point out that while a no-notice absence is always more serious, every absence—excused or not—hurts the company and the department, and affects the employee's performance.

Your Consultant many times provides advice to a distributor manager on how to discipline an employee with an absenteeism problem. The following suggestions come to mind:

1. Meet privately with the employee to discuss his/her attendance record and reiterate your company's attendance policy.
  2. Express your concern about how the employee's attendance affects his/her work performance, and its cost to the company in terms of missed deadlines, declining productivity, and the overtime you must pay other workers to cover for his/her unscheduled absences.
  3. Listen to the employee's side of the story and decide if he/she has legitimate reasons for being absent. Be aware of reasons that may be covered by the Family and Medical Leave Act, Americans with Disabilities law, etc. Focus on the employee's spotty attendance and how it affects job performance.
  4. Issue a memo to the employee, outlining the problem, the employee's explanation, whether the employee agreed to correct the problem, and by what date. Place a copy in his/her personnel file.
  5. Prepare a written warning, and schedule a second meeting if the employee does not meet the expectations outlined in the first memo. At this meeting, document the continuing problem, set more goals and explain the consequences of continued poor attendance.
  6. Follow company policy by moving from possible suspension to termination.
  7. Maintain totally accurate and objective documentation regarding employee absenteeism and any meetings or discussions held.
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## Some final do's and don'ts.....

- DO** make review of your absenteeism policy a key part of your applicant interviewing and employee orientation process. Reinforce good on-time and at-work habits early in an employee's tenure. Behavior gets set in stone within the first 90 days on the job, so make sure it's the positive kind. After that initial period, if the employee's already used to drifting in 10 minutes late or regularly stretching his lunch hour to an hour and a half, you may never get him/her to stop.
- DO** factor attendance into performance appraisals—and make sure every employee knows it's one way to earn points toward a promotion or raise. Then practice what you preach. Downgrade an employee who misses too many days or fails to show up on time, all the time. Reward employees who come to work on the dot and never miss a day.
- DO** try to be an equal opportunity criticizer. No one will feel you're being fair, if many are late, but only a select few are singled out for a sharp word or other punishment.
- DO** link lost time to the actual problems it causes. Some employees see the occasional mental health day as a "victimless crime." Point out the heavier (and unfair) burden being late or absent puts on co-workers, how the productivity of the whole team suffers, how a ripple effect makes everyone look bad. *Example:* You know Joe will have to do the deliveries now, since you won't be here."

- ❑ **DO** give the business version of a “gold star” to top “performers.” Those employees with perfect attendance should be roundly praised at company events and department meetings, and awarded plum assignments.
- ❑ **DON'T** ever penalize employees who have a *legal* reason to be late or absent, e.g., they're going to physical therapy or alcohol treatment, or have permission to leave early for a doctor's appointment. The same goes for employees who have a *legitimate* reason to be late or absent, e.g., for using company benefits they have earned, like personal days.
- ❑ **DO** encourage employees to put their anger on hold, if they think you're wrong. *Example:* Wait until the day's over, or there's a lull in the work, before you try to iron out your differences or seek a higher authority to solve an overtime dispute.
- ❑ **DO** have a heart. Try to find a suitable replacement for an overtime assignment, if an employee's planning a once-in-a-blue-moon event. Don't stick to your guns only because you don't want to be seen as backing down.
- ❑ **DON'T** put employees in the impossible situation of choosing their job over family responsibilities. Digging in your heels without a reason makes employees resentful and damages morale.

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**IN CONCLUSION**, while employee absenteeism is very costly, it can be controlled. Hopefully, the above points will assist distributor managers in helping employees improve unacceptable absenteeism patterns and maintain a productive work status.

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