

the **HRDIRECTOR**

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the **HRDIRECTOR INTERVIEW:**

**Bernard Buckley -
HR director, Cable & Wireless**

FORUM: LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT

Tailoring for that perfect fit

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Not just a buzzword, more a way of life

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Tackling and monitoring this
ever-present challenge

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Carphone Warehouse
Henkel
Hydrogen Group
PerkinElmer

Pictured: Bernard Buckley
HR director, Cable & Wireless

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DON'T MISS NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE WHERE WE LOOK AT: EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT; CONTACT CENTRES; BENEFITS; H&S – ADDICTIONS AT WORK; COACHING... AND MUCH, MUCH MORE



GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

IF YOUR BUSINESS WAS HAEMORRHAGING £12 BILLION EACH YEAR, WOULDN'T YOU WANT TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT? WELL, CHANCES ARE YOUR BUSINESS IS CONTRIBUTING TO JUST SUCH A LOSS FOR UK PLC, IN ITS ABSENTEE FIGURES. SO WHAT ARE YOU DOING ABOUT IT? WHAT COULD YOU BE DOING ABOUT IT?

There are, it seems, any number of routes available to us to effect beneficial changes as Lucy Adams, Group HR director for Serco Group, points out.



"Firstly, I think we tend to assume all absenteeism is bad – i.e. that we should be doing all we can to get people back into work," says Adams. "At Serco, our wellbeing strategy is all about getting people back to work as soon as possible but only when they are well enough. Therefore our approach to tackling and monitoring absenteeism has two strands: looking after people who are not well and reducing the level of unnecessary absenteeism."

Serco have several elements to looking after people who are not well and they include:

- A central helpline to call on the first day they are unwell
- Offers of occupational health and stress-related counselling where appropriate
- Employee assistance programmes (i.e. access to drug, alcohol and debt counseling, for example) for employees that need more support
- Healthier lifestyle promotions e.g. cycle to work schemes
- Long term ill-health financial support and monitoring.

When it comes to reducing the levels of unnecessary absenteeism, Adams admits Serco tends not to have a Group-wide strategy *"...as we operate in very different styles of business, e.g. science establishments which have almost no absenteeism, through to prison management or providing cleaning and catering in hospitals where absenteeism tends to be much higher. Each operating unit monitors absenteeism every month and analyses trends that are relevant to that business. Whilst each business leader works towards targets to reduce absenteeism, for some parts of the business it is a more significant issue and we have focused efforts to reduce it significantly in those areas.*

"For example, in one of our train companies we had a push on having a face-to-face meeting with every person on their return to work. This had an incredible impact as managers had previously ignored the issue. Another example was also in our transportation business where we referred individuals with musculo-skeletal problems to a chiropractor as soon as they notified us. It is well recognised that with certain types of ailments – such as back pain – early treatment can have a major impact on reducing the amount of time away from work, whereas if someone has flu there is little you can do but wait it out and get them to take plenty of rest.

"For me there are three key elements to reducing absenteeism:

- *Simple good leadership – know your staff. Good managers know who is likely to swing the lead and when to probe a little deeper and those who actually need encouragement to stay at home if they are ill.*
- *Look at trends and themes. We noticed that certain staff would be inclined to take a week off if they were refused leave when they were due to work at a weekend. When we got to the bottom of it they believed that they would be less likely to be challenged if they took some 'serious time off' rather than just the odd day.*
- *Be prepared to have the honest conversation. Regular offenders rely on managers' dislike of asking what is wrong with an employee. Helping managers to have a very direct conversation in a sensitive way can really help to reduce unnecessary absenteeism."*

Another view comes from Helen Crooks, an HR consultant at Premier Employer Solutions. Her extensive experience in dealing with absenteeism, both in-house and consultancy, leads her to the following conclusions about absenteeism:

"There are two clear types of absenteeism – short-term and long-term – both of which are very different and have a variety of causes.

"It is important for businesses with an absenteeism problem, of whatever nature, to publicise and communicate its absence management policy clearly by, for example, having an absence management training programme in place. To encourage employees to return to work after a longer period of absence employers should be as accommodating as reasonably possible, by removing any barriers preventing people from returning to work. Establishing a rehabilitation scheme for long-term absent employees, to ease them back into the work place, is another measure which can be particularly effective in the case of stress-related absence.

"Measuring the effect of absenteeism is not 'fool-proof' as not all the effects are quantifiable. Whilst those effects that are quantifiable include the company's sick pay bill, or temporary cover pay bill, it is difficult to measure non-quantifiable effects which can actually have a deeper impact on the business and its balance sheet.

"The 'lost opportunity' costs of an employee being absent, for example, can impact the company's bottom line, so measuring the sales not achieved by an absent sales person, or the additional workload put on other employees due to the absence is vital."

The last resort for dealing with absenteeism is disciplinary action against the employee.

"Launching disciplinary action for absence from the work place, in conjunction with seeking medical information from the employee's GP, can be necessary when it is no longer reasonable for an employer to be accommodating or when there are suspicions as to the genuineness of the absence," Crooks concludes.

Those looking for solutions might also want to chat with Steve Roberts. He is the sales and marketing director for Mountain Healthcare Limited. They are presently expanding from their present area of operations in East Anglia and London and number the police among their clients. Roberts says his clients are taking a more human approach to the absenteeism issue as they want to tackle the causes of absenteeism, not simply the symptoms.

"Typically, a minor acute ailment can take anything up to 48 hours to be seen by a doctor," says Roberts. "Once you have been signed-off there tends to be little communication between doctor and patient about how long you will be off work and what you should do when you go back; should you be on light duties, for example, or even be in a different area initially?"

Roberts says his company's service is seen very much as a benefit to the employee, not just the employer, because they can be seen by a doctor very quickly – either at work or at home – and all the factors relating to a return to work are addressed. Speed is important, he says, citing evidence similar to Adams which shows that the faster a patient is seen, the more rapid is their return to work.

"People have different experiences with their GP practices," comments Roberts. "Some are very good while others aren't. Very few, these days, will come out to the patient, and this is where our service differs from others. We will go to the patient at the workplace or at home, whether during the day or at night. It is a truly 24/7 operation.

"We can even extend our treatment to family members as a consequence of our recent Healthcare Commission approval, and that is very important, particularly when you consider that the CBI estimates the cost of absenteeism at £500 per person per day," says Roberts.

Gordon Tinline believes UK businesses have become better at intervening early in absenteeism cases. He is a chartered occupational therapist and director of Robertson Cooper Limited.

"I think businesses have become much better at preventing short-term absences from becoming long-term absences, but if you don't understand in the first place that work-related causes are leading to raised absenteeism then you are still going to have a problem – you might get better at harnessing the problem, but it is still going to be there".

Tinline's company advocates the need to work with line managers in particular, so that they pick-up the signs of unhappy, stressed or unmotivated staff earlier. Those, he says, are the people who are most likely to go on sickness absence and, he argues, it is all a matter of thinking about the earliest time at which the tell-tale symptoms can be spotted – and then acted upon.

"A lot of our work, particularly in the area of avoidance of stress-related sickness absence, has been to give managers the confidence to have the right – but not necessarily easy – conversation with the employee at the right time," says Tinline. "Carried out in a supportive manner it can hopefully stop that person from going off sick.

"It is not an easy task. If they do spot an employee looking frustrated, frazzled or stressed, the manager needs to know how to establish the conversation – right down to the basics, such as what they should and shouldn't say, and what the limits are of their comfort and competency in this area. They also need to consider whether or not they need to bring in specialist help."

Tinline is conscious of the fact that many organisations may be asking themselves: *"Is this a can of worms I really want to open?"* The answer has to be 'Yes'.

Of course, it is easy to come away with the idea that absenteeism is rife throughout British industry, yet that is far from the truth. Significant though absenteeism undoubtedly is, it is far from being the all-pervading threat some would have us believe.



ABSENTEEISM & CULTURE ACROSS THE WORLD

ERIC SMART IS AMAZED THAT ABSENTEEISM IS STILL A HOT TOPIC FOR THE BOARDROOM. HE IS THE CEO AT SMART HUMAN LOGISTICS AND PULLS NO PUNCHES ON THE ISSUE OF ABSENTEEISM.



"How can this subject still be a focus of UK management?" he asks. "For 20 years the CBI has reported the annual cost of absence to UK business as £12 – 13bn, with government employees rated with the worst statistics and smaller companies faring better than larger ones. It's not as if this were a complex subject. It seems to illustrate poor management, as all studies show that clear policies backed up with firm management can greatly alleviate the costly scourge.

"The whole area is so emotive, as it touches on how unfair absenteeism is on those employees who have none, or very little – it cannot avoid the aura of suspicion and blame. Ultimately it is a culture thing, with each organisation ending up with the norms that policies have encouraged or allowed," says Smart.

So is this a peculiarly British workplace phenomenon from which our foreign counterparts are immune?

"The national psyche is an appropriate area to consider," argues Smart. "It seems that absenteeism is a 'UK thing'...with Europe experiencing similar problems but in some cases having a more accepting culture. However, often the countries with generous holiday leave and low hours of statutory working time have the worst absenteeism rates. That surely points to the national culture.

"Take Japan as another extreme. Workers will regularly attend work (and students attend college) when they have colds or flu or similar illnesses. Perhaps the reason for this is because of the national culture – to show you are strong, but also more endearingly to show your employer that you respect him and will not let him down. Likewise it would be considered disrespectful to your colleagues to be absent and let the workload fall on them.

"The European record is split between the eastern countries where wages are low and people have little unproductive time, and the western ones where the social model is different; in France and Sweden, for example, the non-productive time is between 25-30%. By those standards the UK performs quite well."

For further information:



www.smart-workforce.com



"In almost all organisations you find that the vast majority of employees take either very little time off or no time off at all." So says Dr Trevor Smith of PMI Health Group.

"It is a small proportion of employees who take fairly frequent short-term absences," he says. "If you understand that there are no differences in those populations from a medical perspective then you come to the conclusion that the issues involved with frequent short-term absences are those of employee attitudes. In other words, the problem you have to tackle is a behavioural issue, not a medical issue.

"The essence of dealing with the problem is first of all to capture the absence, particularly in a white collar environment where absences of perhaps just one or two days may not be recorded. Once noted, the organisation must then have someone tasked with following-up the matter with the employee, assessing what is wrong and how best the situation can be remedied.

"The vast majority of short-term absences will not be work related."

The underlying message from everyone seems to say combating absenteeism is all about how people are treated. Welfare initiatives are good but it also serves well to remember that while staff don't expect to be molly-coddled or praised to the nth degree, they do expect to be respected and noticed – and occasionally told they are doing a good job.

For further information:



www.mountainhealthcare.co.uk



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www.pmihealthgroup.co.uk



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