

The presenteeism and leaveism crisis.

Why presenteesim and leaveism are costing the economy billions and what solutions businesses are implementing to limit the impact.

Understanding presenteeism and leaveism

In its simplest form, presenteesim is the practice of being present at work for more hours than contracted or required, usually occurring when an employee believes their job is at risk.

It's a term that is being used more frequently today, with reports being published on the matter every year around the world.

Presenteeism is also closely linked with leaveism. This term was first coined by a researcher at Lancaster University Management School, Dr Ian Hesketh, to describe the action of employees using their own annual leave entitlements to work.

Both of these are having a huge impact on the way people live and how businesses operate on a day to day basis.

For instance, presenteeism and leaveism can result in a high staff turnover rate as more and more employees seek a more satisfying workplace. In fact, **one in seven employees resigned from their jobs in 2016, with 10% of new starters handing in their notice before completing a year at the company.** While these figures taken from Coburg Banks may not all boil down to presenteeism and leaveism, there's a strong possibility there's a correlation between them all.

Businesses want to get results and see their employees going above and beyond. However, failing to identify one who is overworked can actually have a negative impact on productivity and revenue.

Fatigue and tiredness are huge factors, with Public Health England's report revealing that lost sleep is costing the UK economy around **£30bn a year.** To delve a little deeper, the report also stated that **200,000 working days** are lost annually due to insufficient sleep.

The issues of presenteeism and leaveism via fatigue and a poor working ethos is also a growing issue in other parts of the world as well. Figuratively speaking, Investors in People found that it's costing the United States \$150bn a year and \$34bn in Australia. The overall consensus is that adults need between seven and nine hours of sleep a night to work at an optimum level.

Presenteeism, in particular, is ripe when it comes to people choosing to work when they are ill as well. In a 2018 report by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), **86% of businesses admitted that they had observed staff attending work while ill, or "presenteeism". In stark comparison, this statistic was just 26% back in 2010.**

Senior Employment Relations Adviser at the CIPD, Rachel Suff, said that "Too few organisations are discouraging unhealthy workplace practices and tackling stress, which is strongly linked to health conditions such as anxiety and depression".

The Office for National Statistics highlighted this point in their research, revealing that the average sickness absence in 2016 was the lowest on record, totalling just 4.3 days per worker, per year, compared to 7.2 days in 1993.

The underlining point is that presenteeism and leaveism are hitting record figures, ultimately changing the dynamic of the way businesses operate on a daily basis. To successfully tackle the issue, a business must understand the significance and impact it's having on their employees and their company's profits.

What are the causes of presenteeism and leaveism?

Both presenteeism and leaveism emerge within a workplace for a number of reasons. In truth, some factors are out of an employer's hands, as the decision process is one society forces individuals to make. For example, if an employee falls under the "sandwich generation".

This term applies to families who require both parents to contribute to the upkeep of the household. Presenteeism then becomes relevant when an employee decides to work when they are ill, in order to save their sick days/or annual leave for when their child is sick. Without a stay at home parent, they are forced to make these tough decisions, which in turn has a negative impact on the way those employees operate during the days they are actually sick. This can also apply when an employee has to look after an elderly family member as well.

More pressingly, presenteeism and leaveism are commonplace due to the work environment businesses implement as a given.

Setting unrealistic expectations can lead to new levels of anxiety in the team, with more attending work ill because they're scared that they'll show a lack of commitment, receive disciplinary action, or lose their jobs. The idea of returning to work after a day off and facing a heavy backlog of emails, missed deadlines and responsibilities can also play a pivotal part in increasing presenteeism and leaveism.

In 2017, a report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (U.S.A) showed that an average of **68% of private industry workers have access to paid sick leave, but most fail to use it**. Anecdotally, this percentage stands between 46% and 47% for workers in service and construction jobs.

Those who don't receive such benefits often report to work when ill just to avoid loss of pay. So in theory, it's a vicious circle highlighting both the poor benefits and environment millions of businesses are failing to address.

Another core reason behind presenteeism and leaveism is the concept of self-importance and loyalty. In many businesses, employees will still come into work when they are sick or use their own holiday to hit deadlines because of three reasons:

1. **They don't want to let the team down.**
2. **They believe no one else can do their job to their high standard.**
3. **They think the business will suffer if they aren't there.**

Society's attitude to work

In today's society, the attitude of employees is a major cause of presenteeism and leaveism. This 'grin and bear it' idea used consistently during World War Two, paired with the unattainable growth in technology advancements and entrepreneurial spirit has created this toxic environment.

A determination to succeed financially has made businesses less open to the various types of illnesses many suffer today, branding "sickness as a weakness". As a result, this starts to rub off on employees and indeed, the new generation.

Emma Lowe has ulcerative colitis and spoke about the issues she faced trying to get her previous managers to understand her illnesses because it wasn't as recognised as others.

"I'd been having at least one day off a month due to my UC and I was told that I should 'grin and bear' the pain," she says.

"Unfortunately [my manager] didn't understand that on those days I was off sick, I couldn't even walk, let alone climb the stairs at work and be sitting in an air-conditioned cyclone.

"My UC put me in hospital in 2010 and I was out sick for nearly two months. My manager at the time did not understand what UC was and had to Google it. Then he had to explain that I was genuinely sick to higher up."

A lack of understanding and a poor attitude towards sickness in the workplace has a domino effect on the way employees think and act.

While this 'grin and bear it' attitude can work at times and help to generate top results, it might also lead to much bigger issues within the business – including a high staff turnover rate and a loss in reputation.

According to Investors in People, 52% of UK workers are currently going to work when their performance is negatively affected by work-related issues and 34% have admitted they have considered moving jobs.

In terms of health, employees that substitute sleep for extended work hours still remains one of the biggest challenges surrounding presenteeism and leaveism.

"Sleep is essential to a healthy life. Deprivation of it increases the risk of premature death, mental health problems, disease and disability. Nobody can perform at their best if they do not have a good quality sleep.

The World Health Organisation estimates that two thirds of adults in developed countries globally do not get the recommended seven to nine hours of sleep each night. The 24/7 digital economy has brought us many good things, creating jobs and prosperity. But the downside is that we are on the go, all the time.

The dividing line between our work and our life outside work has blurred. In a connected society, we are always switched on. Modern lifestyles leave less time for sleep and when we do sleep, it is often interrupted or cut short."

Dr Justin Varney – National Lead for Adult Health and Wellbeing Public Health England

Addressing presenteeism and leaveism

The way that a business tackles presenteeism and leaveism depends on the type of industry and the resources available to them.

Investing in a comfortable place to rest encourages a nicer work environment and the opportunity for employees to take five minutes to gather their thoughts.

A good example to learn from is TranferWise. The UK money transfer service company allow their employees to enjoy some downtime at work, giving them access to an onsite hammock and sauna.

Small benefits like pool tables and coffee machines can also improve the atmosphere around work, enabling employees to feel more relaxed when they go home for the evening and get the right amount of sleep to work productively the following day.

If there is room in the budget, providing paid sick leave or offering more annual leave can discard presenteesim and leaveism. A business who opts for this should see a significant increase in productivity levels, a reduction of contagion in the workplace and an improvement in staff retention.

Flexible working is another method being adopted by many businesses today. Giving employees the extra control to manage their workload and the possibility do it remotely, suits those with hectic lifestyles. This not only contains the spread of illness, but it also gives an employee a peace of mind – leading to a happier and more focused workforce.

However, some ideas don't require a big budget or a creative thought process. For instance, Public Health England said that downtime at work can help employees switch off and get a better quality sleep at night. To put this in practical terms, you could use the final hour or half hour of every day to run an informal meeting with the team. Here, you could enjoy a beer and discuss any successes or issues you've had that day. In turn, employees can start to unwind, switch off and find the positives from any testing days they've endured.

Accountancy company, PwC, offer a training programme to all of their staff in the UK based on the importance of sleep. While there might have been a cost required to set it up, the value is in the content. PwC gives their employees the reassurance and knowledge to subconsciously be able to switch off once they leave the office. As a result, they understand presenteeism and leaveism, plus the negative impacts it can have on the business' productivity and their own health.

Training and resource are particularly vital in the food industry and office environments, as those guilty of presenteeism can spread their illness to others (including customers).

The key here is being sensible and establishing a friendly platform for employees to communicate to their employers. Rethinking your disciplinary procedures and trying to speak to an employee can prevent a lot of issues before they escalate – whether that's staff turnover, health problems or even legal consequences.

The same principle of communication applies to sleep deprivation too.

“We know from our wellbeing work with our staff and the work that we do as a charity, that the most important thing is to start the conversation – making people feel comfortable to start talking about sleep issues they are having which are either caused by or impacting on work.”

Kate Upshall Davis – Wellbeing and Mental Health Manager at Crisis

Hundreds of businesses are also starting to open up the portal of communication via app technology. Enabling employees to quickly communicate sick days and annual leave on an app removes any complications to the process.

By doing this, the employer is telling their staff that it's acceptable and that the business is adaptable to fit around the unique requirements of the individual. As a result, this helps to reduce the pressure and need for presenteeism and leaveism to ever occur in the first place.

Conclusion

A successful business is an open one. A majority of the issues surrounding the presenteeism and leaveism crisis are due to the lack of communication and a poor working environment.

Businesses that apply both paid and practical solutions will eradicate any toxic behaviour. In turn, giving employees the confidence to take the time off, look after their health and feel a greater sense of happiness.

Getting these elements right will help a business go a long way toward reaching better productivity rates, achieving bigger profits and creating an effective/and able workforce.

About Flexr

Flexr is the 'game changing' employment management platform that redefines the engagement between employers and employees.

Since the early part of 2018, they've revolutionised the way SMEs around the world operate their HR departments, introducing enhanced transparency between employees and employers while creating better working relationships.

Their platform is easily accessible through a smartphone app, online desktop portal and call centre.

For more information, visit www.flexr.com.

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