

Go To Work Sick? Knock It Off

'Presenteeism' Passes Illness To Co-Workers, Clients

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RIVERWOODS, III. -- Are you the kind of employee who drags yourself to work no matter how lousy you're feeling? If so, cut it out!

A survey by tax and business law information and software provider CCH said 56 percent of employers now report that "presenteeism" -- when sick employees show up for work -- is a problem for them. Just 39 percent said that in a survey two years ago.

Because sick employees can weaken the corporate bottom line, employers' concern about them is quickly growing.

CCH said sick people reporting for work not only have a lower rate of productivity, but they pass their illness around to other workers and customers.

The survey also finds that more employers are taking steps to help overcome the rise in presenteeism. Sixty-two percent with presenteeism problems said they send sick employees home while another 41 percent educate employees on the importance of staying home when they are sick. About 36 percent said they are fostering a culture that discourages coming to work sick.

But there are other things they can do to combat this. About 27 percent said they are attempting to create more flexibility for their workers who are ill. Of the respondents, 22 percent said they allow employees to telecommute when they are sick and 5 percent give employees an unlimited number of sick days.

The CCH survey made it clear that workplace morale matters. When it comes to presenteeism, the results are not any different. Despite higher rates of unscheduled absenteeism overall, companies with low morale also have more ill workers showing up for work. In fact, 63 percent of organizations with poor to fair morale reported presenteeism is a problem, while only 50 percent of organizations with good or very good morale see it as an issue.

The company said the first step in combating any workplace problem is understanding why it occurs. About 66 percent of responding companies said they believe employees come to work when they are ill because they have "too much work to do/deadlines." In addition, when asked, "Why do you think that some employees come to work even when they are ill?" survey respondents replied:

- No one available to cover their workload (56 percent);
- Do not want to use vacation time (50 percent);
- Fear of discipline (46 percent);
- Want to save sick time for later in the year (41 percent);
- Company loyalty (36 percent);
- Company culture discourages using sick days (25 percent); and
- Too difficult to work from home for some people (15 percent).

The company said that companies need to be careful not to inadvertently encourage presenteeism. The CCH survey revealed a growing concern that some traditional absence control and sick policies may inadvertently encourage employee presenteeism.

Organizations that adhere to traditional sick-time policies and take disciplinary action to enforce them may be making it difficult for employees to do the right thing. If, for example, an organization allows each employee five sick days a year and takes disciplinary action on the sixth day of absence, an employee who has been wiped out with the flu for several days early in the year may choose to come to work ill rather than risk the discipline.