



How to beat presenteeism

Are the hacks and sniffles that echo throughout your workplace hallways music to your ears? It's hardly a mark of pride to have employees drag themselves to work, even when they feel (and look) like hell. In fact, according to numerous studies, "presenteeism" costs employers more than absenteeism. Lost productivity from the working ill – not to mention the toll on co-workers when the bugs spread – overshadows the cost of sick pay and health benefits. Here's how to keep the sickos away.

Walk the talk

If you're holed up in your office with a bottle of echinacea and a packet of Halls, don't expect your staff to act any differently. "If an employee's manager is coming in and wheezing and struggling, they're setting the stage that if you're sick, you should follow suit," notes Cissy Pau, principal consultant of Clear HR Consulting. "It's funny how closely employees watch their manager. They watch when they eat lunch and when they go to the bathroom – all these little things." If you don't want your staff spreading their germs around, keep yours at home, too.

DON'T REWARD MARTYRS

Don't turn around and hand out kudos to those who never use their sick days. "Some companies have policies that if an employee uses no sick days during the year, they get a bonus at the end of the year," observes Pau. She has even worked with a group that gave staff two paid days off at Christmas for every leftover sick day. "All that does is give people an incentive to come to work if they're sick."

Home work

If a sniffly employee absolutely insists on working, consider setting them up at home. "Allow employees to work from home so they can have some connectivity, and enable them at least to monitor what's going on and track emails if need be," suggests Larry Axelrod, consultant and president of The Neutral Zone Coaching & Consulting Services Inc. But make sure you're not sending mixed messages, warns Michelle Sharp, president of Edge Training & Consulting Ltd. "Giving people remote access can say, 'Even though you're sick, you're supposed to be working.'"

Cover your bases

Feeling indispensable is great; feeling like everything will collapse without you is a burden. If an employee is in charge of a crucial task at work, make sure there's someone in the office who can cover for them in case they can't make it in. In a small office, have key workflow procedures such as payroll spelled out in an easy-to-understand document, suggests Pau.

Otherwise, your employees will just drag themselves in, along with their nasty viruses. "They figure, 'I'm going to come back to double the workload, so I might as well suck it up and come in.'"

BE WELL

The best way to avoid a mountain of germ-infested Kleenex in office cubicles is, of course, to keep your people healthy. You needn't go as far as U.K. telecom giant BT Group PLC, which inspects employees' timesheets to spot people who are spending too long at work. Other options include having a good employee-assistance program, offering free flu shots and providing fitness classes during lunch hour. According to Harvard Business School's *Working Knowledge* newsletter, gains in productivity far outweigh the costs of such programs. ■



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