

COVID-19 pandemic heightens an 'always on' work culture

BRIAN SHEEHAN

A new survey shows that “unhealthy working habits” are proving hard to break, with most employers seeing “presenteeism and leaveism” in staff over the last year.

Despite the sharp increase in homeworking and perceived flexibility benefits as a result of the pandemic, more than three quarters (77%) of employers have observed people working when unwell in those who are working from home in the last year.

This is slightly higher than levels of presenteeism in employees attending the workplace (75%), according to the latest CIPD/Simplyhealth Health and Wellbeing at Work survey report.

CIPD (UK) says the survey of 668 people professionals, representing 2.7 million employees, also found 'leaveism' – working outside of contracted hours or using annual leave to work or when ill – is an issue, with seven in ten (70%) employers observing this unhealthy behaviour over the same period. While more organisations are taking steps to address these issues compared with last year, over two-fifths experiencing presenteeism (43%) and leaveism (47%) aren't taking any action.

The findings “suggest that many organisations haven't been taking effective action to combat the risks of an 'always on' culture during the pandemic”, says CIPD.

“Boundaries between work and home life have become increasingly blurred for many people working from home for example, making it difficult for people to switch off”, it says.

TOP CAUSE

The CIPD/Simplyhealth research also found that “unmanageable workloads” is by far the top cause of work-related stress (59% of respondents), which could contribute to presenteeism.

“It's crucial for organisations to address any issues that could be creating a culture where staff feel they are expected to work when ill or feel it's the only way they can stay on top of their workload”, CIPD says.

“Managers should assess individual and team workloads to make sure they are reasonable, set clear expectations about taking breaks, and act as good role models for healthy working practices, such as taking time off when sick.”

Rachel Suff, Senior Policy Adviser, Employment Relations at the CIPD, advises employers to take a “strategic and preventative approach” to wellbeing in order to tackle work-related stress and unhealthy behaviour like presenteeism and leaveism. She said this must be role modelled by those in senior positions.

“They should also recognise the important role that line managers play in supporting individuals with their health and wellbeing. Managers should be equipped with the appropriate training, support and guidance needed to do this effectively”, she says.

BUILD ON GAINS

It was important that employers don't lose sight of the gains they have made in supporting people's health and wellbeing as we move through the next stages of the pandemic and beyond.

“Increased support over the last year must not be viewed as a sticking plaster for the situation we are currently in. Instead, employers should view health and wellbeing as a business-critical issue and build on this support for the long-term,” Ms Suff added.

Angela Sherwood, Chief People Officer at Simplyhealth, said the vast majority (82%) of respondents said they were concerned about the impact of Covid-19 on employees' mental health.

Additional steps to improve employee health and wellbeing include an increased focus on mental health (84%) and more support tailored to individuals' needs and concerns, such as flexible working (83%).

Key areas for improvement have been identified as follows:

- Equip line managers with the right training, knowledge and skills to support people's health effectively – only 38% of organisations are providing more line management training to support employee wellbeing following COVID-19 and just 43% train managers to support people with mental ill health.
- Take a more strategic approach to enhance wellbeing, prevent ill health and support people when they become unwell – only half (50%) of organisations take a strategic approach to wellbeing.
- Increase investment in wellbeing – just a quarter (26%) report their allocated budget for wellbeing benefits has increased as a consequence of the pandemic.