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Absence in the public sector: Are managers managing?

Fiona Robson

Abstract

This paper focuses on absence management, one of HR's most contemporary issues due to the costs to the UK economy, individual organisations, managers and employees. This subject has been the focus of much research but one aspect has remained under-represented; the role of first line managers (FLMs) in managing absence. This work disseminates some of the results of an exciting research project involving ten UK Local Authorities who all have higher than average levels of absence in the same Department: Adult Social Services. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods this work investigates the extent to which managers appear to be managing absence in comparison with best practice criteria. Recommendations from this study include the need for adopting a holistic approach and increased focused support for FLMs. To conclude, yes, managers are managing absence but only just and more work is needed to gain the maximum benefits.

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Absence in the public sector: Are managers managing?

This paper provides a strong rationale for the need for research in the area of the role of first line managers (FLMs) in managing absence, particularly in the public sector. This is achieved by presenting an overview of the existing literature, before introducing the empirical work that has been carried out for this study. There are three key concepts investigated in this paper; absence in the public sector, the role of FLMs in the absence management process and best practice in managing absence. The context for this research is presented alongside the research methods that have been utilised. This paper finishes by concluding the findings and provides recommendations which should be relevant to both practitioner and academic communities.

Introduction

Managing sickness absence is possibly one of the most topical issues for HR practitioners as it is an issue that affects all businesses regardless of sector, size or age. The wider cost of absence to the UK economy is widely reported as being in excess of £13.2 billion (CBI, 2006) which confirms that the topic is worthy of further investigation. The last published CIPD (2006) survey calculated the cost per employee per year as being £598 (£680 average in public sector) but this does not allow for the less tangible costs such as impact on colleagues and managers, time taken to recruit and train replacements, and potential reduction in quality and quantity of outputs which can all have an impact on organisations (McHugh, 2001).

Absence levels in the public sector are consistently higher than their private sector counterparts (CBI, 2006) though figures differ slightly between studies, depending on sample sizes. CIPD (2006) revealed the difference between sectors to be the equivalent of 1.9 days, though HSE (2005) have suggested that private sector organisations may be less rigorous in the recording of absence which may mean that the actual gap between them is less pronounced. To put this difference in absence levels into context, CBI (2006) estimate that if public sector absence levels could be reduced to the same level of their private sector counterparts, a saving of £1.1 billion per year could be achieved in addition to the less tangible costs. However, HSE (2005) have explored the perceived differences in more detail and suggest that some of the headline figures provided by organisations such as CBI are misleading. This is based on the premise that the absence figures should take into account the size of the organisation and the difference in

demographic profiles. After performing these standardisations, HSE (2005) believe that public sector employees only take an average of 0.3 days more sick leave per year than their public sector counterparts which is significantly less than CBI (2006). Wooden (1990) proposes four key reasons why absenteeism levels may be higher in the public sector. Firstly he argues that there is greater job security, and therefore repeated absences are considered unlikely to lead to dismissal. Secondly he suggests that the demands of the jobs are fundamentally different because there are less competitive pressures, and that this can lead to lower performance standards which may ultimately provide less pressure for employees to attend work. In addition, Wooden (1990) and Vandenneuvel (1994) believe that the more generous sick leave entitlements and the perception of widespread lower levels of job satisfaction may also have an impact. It is interesting to note that this is not a problem which is unique to the UK as very similar issues have been identified in Australia by organisations such as the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO).

Over the last decade there has been a wealth of Government-led research looking at absence and proposing interventions to try and minimise avoidable absence, with one of the key documents being the joint review by the Ministerial Task Force for Health, Safety and Productivity and the Cabinet Office (Cabinet Office, 2004). This strong focus on absence is likely to be linked to the large numbers of targets and performance indicators which must be achieved. Targets include those set by Gershon (2004) to achieve over £20 billion of efficiencies and HSE's (2004) target of reducing absence levels by 30%. This is alongside the best value performance indicators (bvpi) that Local Authorities must report on, (Audit Commission, 2005) including their targets for future performance. To support these targets, a number of recommendations have been made in publications such as Cabinet Office (2004) and National Audit Office (2006). The key recommendations that are consistently offered are:

- Requirement for accurate recording and monitoring of absence
- Visible senior management commitment
- Training for managers
- A comprehensive policy and procedures
- Consistency in applying policy and procedures

Research also shows that in addition to complying with the above recommendations, ultimately organisations require a holistic approach to managing absence (Cabinet Office, 2004). The concentration on this area of people management and the resources that have been allocated to it may have begun to make a positive impact as CBI (2006) reports a reduction in levels of absence since their previous survey (CBI, 2005). However, the methodologies employed in these surveys do not allow us to verify whether or not this was the only changing variable. Cabinet Office (2005) discusses the progress that has been made since the publication of their 2004 strategy for reducing absence. This report indicates that progress has begun which is demonstrated in reduced absence levels, but concedes that it is a long term strategy whereby some interventions will need to be embedded over a period of years before a consistent reduction becomes apparent.

The role of FLMs

Having established the extent of the absence problem, and highlighted that it is the public sector that are suffering the most, it is appropriate to consider the role that FLMs now play in delivering people management issues. In the last decade a significant number of HR responsibilities have been devolved to FLMs (Bond and Wise, 2003) and in earlier research, Brewster and Larsen (2000) identified several reasons why this trend was instigated including cost reduction and to place responsibility with the people involved most directly with the employees. Although these issues provide a fairly strong justification for this change, the disadvantages of not having expert HR professionals on hand must also be acknowledged. Many authors have confirmed the important role that FLMs now play in people management processes in organisations (Cunningham and Hyman, 1995) including the fact that their practices and behaviours can have a strong impact on their employees and their commitment to the organisation (Thornhill and Saunders, 1998). The role of FLMs can be very challenging due to the complexity and competing priorities which is described by Cunningham, James and Dibben (2004:273) as:

“The balancing of production or service requirements, on the one hand, and compliance with organizational prescriptions as to how staff should be managed, on the other”

This suggests that in an already complex job it is possible that the pressures associated with managing absence could be seen as role overload (Dibben, James and Cunningham 2001a).

Looking specifically at the role of FLMs within the public sector is a particularly pertinent issue as their evolving role has been the subject of much discussion and this may have an impact on both how they carry out their people management duties and their outputs. Arroba and Wedgwood-Oppenheim (1994) suggest that FLMs have traditionally been promoted as they were highly competent in their own jobs, not because of their potential for managerial competence or expertise in HR areas. This may mean that they are not sufficiently skilled in carrying out the full range of people management duties or may lack sufficient confidence or knowledge. This is reinforced in work by IPD (1995) which established that FLMs are not always confident and comfortable in carrying out all of their required tasks. One of the conclusions of the highly acclaimed work of Purcell et al (2003) which investigated the people and performance link confirms the importance of the role of FLMs and states that it is the way that they implement and enact policies which can make a difference. As well as highlighting the importance of the role that FLMs carry out, this also reinforces the need for adequate training and support to enable the FLMs to carry out their people management responsibilities correctly (Cunningham and Hyman, 1995). In addition it is essential that FLMs receive support from both senior managers and HR in order to be able to carry out their tasks effectively. This must also be incorporated into the design of HR policies, particularly when it is the FLMs that are charged with carrying them out (Purcell et al 2003), perhaps one way of achieving this would be to encourage the input of FLMs at the design stage. The literature on the changing role of FLMs is also clear that they need to have a full understanding of their role with no ambiguities and an acceptance of their responsibilities (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2003). The devolvement of many roles of people management to FLMs has an effect on the position of HR as they need to perform a different role which may be more 'consultative' or 'supportive' than in the past when they were dealing directly with employees. This is certainly the case in absence management (NAO, 2005).

Best practice in the management of absence

A wealth of literature is available which discusses the best way to manage absence and it is clear that there is no one right answer. The use of return-to-work interviews is considered to be the most effective intervention by practitioners (CIPD, 2006) when part of a package of absence management interventions. Nonetheless, sickness absence policies probably hold the overall key to managing absence (Bennett,

2002) as the use of return-to-work interviews and many of the other interventions are only effective when conducted as part of a more holistic process. All public sector organisations are required to have a policy though it is interesting to note that 82% of respondents from this sector in the CIPD (2006) survey stated that their policy had changed within the last two years. This may be following the increased emphasis placed on absence management at both a national and local level. Of course the presence of a policy alone is not sufficient, it must be comprehensive and detailed so that all stakeholders (including absent employees) are clear about their role and responsibilities. Procedures relating to the policy should also be included which detail the actions that need to be taken, when and by whom. It is also important that the policy should clearly emphasise the organisational culture of attendance rather than being seen as existing only to crack down on absence (Hayday, 2006). An effective policy also '*acknowledges the interdependence of individual and organisational health*' (McHugh, 2002:735) to reinforce the importance of attendance to all stakeholders and the impact that high levels of absence can have. Bevan (2003) believes that measuring and monitoring of absence is essential but fears that this does not happen in most organisations. This means that it is essential for all spells of absence to be recorded accurately and on a timely basis. If the organisation does not have detailed records they are unlikely to be able to pursue cases where malingering is suspected. Other interventions which can be utilised include; referrals to Occupational Health practitioners, use of disciplinary procedures and use of trigger points. Alternatively, a more proactive approach could include the provision of health checks, reduced gym subscriptions and wellbeing advice.

The role of FLMs in managing absence

Looking specifically at the role of FLMs in managing absence, many reports have emphasised the vital role that they have to play, though this is not often based on empirical evidence and therefore does not explore in detail how or why they can have an impact. Edwards (1982:2) clearly values the role of FLMS and states:

“What managers actually do, as distinct from what they think, will influence the nature of [absence] behaviour”

This view was confirmed in the later work of Bevan (2003:22) who believes:

“The role of line managers is crucial to developing good practice in managing attendance since they have the closest contact with the individuals concerned”.

Dibben et al's (2001a) public services research established that the role of line managers was key across the range of organisations that they investigated and this view was reinforced in the later work of McHugh (2002) who believes that a definite link exists between good management practices and employee well-being. Looking specifically at public sector based research, this perception of FLMs is supported in much of the Government commissioned research (Cabinet Office, 2004) and Whitaker (2001:422) also believes that *'management attitudes and behaviours'* may influence an employee's decision about whether they should attend work or be absent. There is clearly a body of evidence agreeing that the role of FLMs is important, but there are also challenges associated with them having responsibility for managing absence. Some concerns remain about the extent to which FLMs accept this as part of their role (Hayday, 2006) whilst McHugh's (2001) research established that one of the key issues was the lack of consistency in the way that FLMs manage absence. This is an interesting dilemma as whilst following policies is important there are also some instances whereby FLMs may need to display discretion (Bevan and Hayday, 1998). IPD (1995) argues that FLMs need to be accountable for areas such as managing absence and this may remind them of the importance that should be attributed to this area. This could be achieved through formal links with the performance management system.

Dibben et al (2001b:59) state that one of the principal hindering factors in FLMs managing absence was:

“the failure of line managers to adequately prioritise absence management, or to comply with the arrangements regarding such matters as the recording of absences and the carrying out of return-to-work interviews”

Specific concerns on a practical level that have been raised include; failure to maintain the required contact with employees and supporting them on their return to work (Dibben et al 2001a). The fact that FLMs do not always feel equipped to deal with the situations they face in managing absence cases may be attributable to a lack of confidence or knowledge or be due to feelings of embarrassment (Bevan, 2003). Hayday (2006) confirms the importance of FLMs having confidence in their ability to follow the policies and suggests that without this confidence they will be unable to perform all of their required duties. In the public sector, FLMs are often hesitant about contacting absent employees in case this could be interpreted

as harassment, there is also a stigma attached to having to potentially defend actions within an employment tribunal. This may be one of the reasons that Dibben et al's (2001a) public sector research discovered a lack of willingness to actively manage sickness absence. The wider remit of their newly devolved roles and the large amount of pressures on FLMs also means that they normally prioritise the operational tasks of someone being off absent rather than working through the appropriate procedures (McHugh, 2001).

Training on absence management is essential for FLMs (Bevan, 2003; Cabinet Office, 2004 and Acas, 2006) though the evidence suggests that this is not taking place consistently across organisations.

Research by ANAO (2003) found that only one fifth of the respondents indicated that they had received specific training on managing absence. This is a concern when the best practice literature consistently reinforces the importance of it. As managing absence is a complex task with many inter-related tasks this must be reflected in the format, content and duration of training programmes (ANAO, 2003). It is also essential that it is offered on a regular basis and is comprehensive. To date many training programmes focus principally on how to follow policies and procedures and this is unlikely to be sufficient; FLMs must also receive training in some of the softer skills such as being able to communicate effectively to lead a return-to-work interview and how to have difficult conversations (ACAS, 2006). They also need to learn how to analyse and interpret the absence data and learn how to use this data when employees hit organisational trigger points. These are clearly a diverse range of hard and soft skills and this must be taken into account at the design stage. Johnson et al (2003) state that organisations need to be aware of their own levels of absence statistics so that they can take appropriate actions and this also enables benchmarking across other departments and organisations. In order to do this, organisations must have an I.T system capable of collecting the relevant information and providing it in a useable format. Following on from this, the data must actually be provided on a timely basis, used promptly and to support the work of the FLMs (ANAO, 2003). This should enable early identification of problems rather than leaving it too late, as described in some of the organisational examples in Dunn and Wilkinson (2002).

All of the stakeholders need to have clarity in who is responsible for what and how they work together as part of the holistic approach (ANAO, 2003). This includes FLMs, middle managers, senior managers, HR

and employees, it is particularly important that FLMs understand their position and how they should work alongside HR (Robson, 2006) failure to do this can cause tensions amongst different groups in the organisation and makes effective management of absence very difficult. NAO (2005) also believes that senior management support is crucial and that their commitment to this area will help to emphasise the focus on employee well-being alongside the development of an attendance culture. McHugh's (2001) work highlighted the fact that FLMs believed that ultimately it was HR that had responsibility for policy implementation and the necessary monitoring arrangements, which is clearly an outdated approach in many organisations. McHugh (2002) found that there was an inconsistency between managers of their understanding of the policies and whilst many managers believed that they did have a good understanding, few could demonstrate their awareness and correct interpretation. Inability to understand the policies could account for this or it may be down to more pragmatic issues such as accessibility or lack of time to consult them.

To date, a limited amount of research has been conducted into how the characteristics of FLMs may have an impact on employee well-being such as the work of Moore, Grunberg and Greenberg (2005) who looked at the role of gender and Kerr, Boyle and Heaton (2006) who investigated emotional intelligence. There is also some emerging literature which has identified that there may be a correlation between the management styles of FLMs and the impact on the absence levels of their employees (Johnson et al, 2003). Research by van Dierendonck et al (2002) is also interesting in that it looks at the LMX (leader member exchange) relationship between FLMs and their employees. This study established that the relationship between the quality of the exchange relationship did have an 'important influence' on the well-being of subordinates, so further work is expected in this area.

Context of research

This research was commissioned as part of a wider research project which is investigating sickness absence in Adult Services Departments in Local Authorities (formerly known as Adult Social Services Departments) as part of an innovative collaboration of ten Local Authorities and a Business School, funded by two of the Regional Centres for Excellence. This project is important to the Authorities as part of their commitment to meeting Gershon's (2004) requirement for gaining efficiencies and was

established because all of the Authorities reported their highest level of absence to be within their Adult Services Departments, this is depicted for the two Organisations featured in this research in Table 1. This element of the project involved working with two Local Authorities (shown as Authority A and Authority B) to look specifically at the role of FLMs in managing absence.

| Table 1 | 2002-03 | | 2003-04 | | 2004-05 | | 2005-06 | |
|--------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| | Average for council | Average for Adult SS | Average for council | Average for Adult SS | Average for council | Average for Adult SS | Average for council | Average for Adult SS |
| Authority A | 10.73 | 15.03 | 12.9 | 18.63 | 12.56 | 20.80 | 11.87 | 15.62 |
| Authority B | 14.3 | n/a | 14.25 | n/a | 13.06 | 20.25 | 14.29 | 24.78 |

Figures shown are the average number of days of absence per employee per year .

There is some existing work available which discusses why absence is a particular problem in this Department and this includes the work of Balloch et al (1995) who confirms that this is a common and nationwide issue. Horder (1999) suggests that the typical demographic profile of their workforces means that they are more likely to have higher absence levels. This is reflected in the findings of LGAR (2005) which shows that the majority of employees (80.6%) in this sector are female and research has consistently shown that women are absent from work more than men (Barham and Begum, 2005). In addition the age profile of the employees is heavily skewed towards those aged 50 plus, which again is the group who have been shown to have the highest levels of ‘limiting longstanding illness’ which is associated with higher average levels of long term absence (Barham and Leonard 2002). The nature of the jobs in this Department may also be a contributing factor as employees are often required to carry out jobs which are particularly physically and/or mentally demanding.

This research aimed to explore how managers perceived absence, how they understood their responsibilities (and the roles of the other stakeholders); how they carry out their duties; ratings of the support they receive; and their experience of managing absence within their organisation, with a view to making recommendations for dissemination across the ten Councils. As part of a consultancy project the aim was to provide recommendations rather than constructing a theoretical model.

Methodology

The study was carried out in January – February 2007 and a multi-method approach was used which included the following:

- Surveys to FLMs
- Focus group discussions carried out with FLMs
- Analysis of organisational absence data
- Analysis of organisational policies and procedures.

It was envisaged that this approach would enable a fuller picture of absence in the organisations by providing quantitative data alongside more qualitative methods which provide rich contextual data. In line with the consulted literature on this subject, the areas shown in Figure 1 were investigated.

Figure 1

- Managers' perceptions of absence levels
- Acceptance of absence management as a responsibility for FLMs
- Understanding of the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders
- Understanding of absence policy and procedures
- Carrying out of absence procedures
- Support received by FLMs.
- Evaluation of absence management training
- Identifying future development needs

Self-completion surveys were sent to all FLMs in the Adult Services Departments of the two Local Authorities. The survey explored a number of factors related to how FLMs manage absence, and looked at their understanding and knowledge of absence management. There was also a strong focus on their understanding of which stakeholders are responsible for different areas of the absence policy and to see if they accepted the importance of their own role. This was triangulated by comparing their interpretations of who was responsible for the various aspects with the organisations' policy and procedures. The survey was distributed to over 200 managers and a response rate of over 60% was achieved which was a positive result in comparison to the average response rate for surveys of 55.6% identified in the work of (Baruch, 1999). Particularly when much UK based public sector research achieves a response rate of approx 30%. This good rate of return may be indicative of the fact that absence management is perceived as being an important issue. Following analysis of the survey results, focus groups were carried out to discuss some of the key results in more detail and to add some valuable context to the survey results. The policies of

both organisations were analysed and their content was found to broadly similar and in line with best practice guidance (CIPD, 2006b and Acas, 2006). However the content did reinforce the point of Purcell and Hutchinson (2007) in suggesting that they had not been written in a user-friendly way to facilitate FLMs. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject under investigation all participants were assured of anonymity in the research report and associated dissemination. In addition to the usual ethical considerations, the setting for this project meant that it was also covered by the Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care (DH, 2005). This led to some restrictions on the areas that could be covered by the research and prevented the use of some potentially useful variables.

Results

The FLMs were asked to self-report their own absence history for the last year as research has indicated that managers have lower levels than employees (Barham and Begum, 2005), this hypotheses was confirmed in the present study where the mean number of days lost per manager is in the '1-3' days band in both organisations. This is considerably less than the Departmental average of 15.62 days in Organisation A and 24.78 days in Organisation B. It is also worthy of note to highlight that almost half of all respondents reported that they had zero absence during the one year time period under investigation. Understanding of the organisation's absence management policies was rated highly within both the focus groups and the survey results, where 85% of respondents rated their knowledge as good or excellent. Their knowledge of the policy was tested further by providing a list of tasks that need to be completed in relation to managing absence (as prescribed in the absence management policies of both organisations) and asking the participants to indicate who they understand to be responsible for carrying them out. An indication of the broad range of tasks is demonstrated in the examples given in Figure 2.

Figure 2

- Ensuring that the Disability Discrimination Act is adhered to
- Ensuring that the absence policy is followed consistently
- Developing strategies for the Council to minimise absence
- Making sure that all employee's are aware of the Council's policy
- Monitoring and analysing divisional absence records
- Identifying when a trigger point has been reached
- Carrying out return-to-work interviews
- Identifying and managing short term absences
- Recognising and encouraging good attendance
- Ensuring that employees are aware of the impact of absence upon the Council

In addition to demonstrating their knowledge of the organisation's absence policies, they also expressed confidence in applying the policies and 85.4% also reported that they had a good or excellent understanding of their personal role in the associated procedures. Another interesting outcome was that over 86% of respondents believed that they had the most important role in the whole process. This suggests that FLMs do accept their role and understand how they have to work in partnership with the other stakeholders. It was also interesting that they did not suggest that HR were the key stakeholders as this would have been consistent with the existing literature (IPD, 1995).

The vast majority of respondents in both groups stated that they had attended some form of training on absence management, though some stated that it was discussed within a general management training event. However, of the 87% that had attended training, over 40% said that they had taken part over three years ago, which is clearly not in line with good practice which suggests that training should take place on a regular basis (Cabinet Office, 2004). However, over two thirds of those that had attended the training rated it as good or excellent which is positive news for the organisations. Despite the fact that the existing training had received positive reports, it is interesting to note that when the FLMs were asked if their knowledge on absence management was up to date the majority (68%) stated that it wasn't. Organisation B fared slightly better than Organisation A as only 43.8% said that they were not up to date in comparison to 64.5% of respondents from Organisation A. The confidence that FLMs have in HR is shown in the fact that they felt that the HR staff were the best people to deliver all of the training except for the issue of *'time to discuss specific cases with HR and senior management'* which they think should be delivered by their own manager. This was consistent across both organisations.

In order to be able to provide specific recommendations to the organisations, the participants were asked to choose from a list of areas that they felt they needed training on, the most frequently shown ones are portrayed in rank order in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Organisation A

1. How to use the disciplinary policy when appropriate in absence cases.
2. How to deal with sensitive situations and groups.
3. How to get the most support from Occupational Health.
4. Support on completing the relevant forms and letters.
5. All areas of absence management
6. Advice on supporting employees when they return to work after an absence.
7. Understanding of their personal role in managing absence.
8. Time to discuss specific cases with HR and senior management.
9. How to carry out return-to-work interviews.

Organisation B

1. How to use the disciplinary policy when appropriate in absence cases.
2. How to deal with sensitive situations and groups.
3. Time to discuss specific cases with HR and senior management.
4. All areas of absence management
5. Support on completing the relevant forms and letters.
6. Advice on supporting employees when they return to work after an absence.
7. How to get the most support from Occupational Health.
8. Understanding of their personal role in managing absence.
9. How to carry out return-to-work interviews.

Analysis of the training requirements of the FLMs shows that there is little variance between the two organisations. It is interesting that one of the most practical issues was considered the least necessary – how to carry out the return-to-work interviews as it would have been reasonable to assume that this would be the first priority. The top five requirements are an interesting blend of hard and soft skills and cover a range of elements of the absence policy. This suggests that the existing training programme that placed an emphasis on how to do interviews was not necessarily meeting the needs of the FLMs.

Supporting FLMs is clearly an important issue and this was investigated within this study by asking the FLMs to assess the levels of support received from different stakeholders. Overall, the support from HR was rated positively, but when divided into ‘Corporate’ and ‘Directorate based’ HR, a different picture emerges where Directorate HR is related much more highly as 49.6% rather their service as good or excellent, in comparison to only 35% of respondents rating Corporate HR in these categories. This may be because Corporate HR will usually be in the position to make the final decision; of which FLMs may not always be in agreement. They were also asked to rate the support received from their managers (see Figure 4) in the managing absence process.

| Figure 4 | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|------|--------------|------|------------------------------|------|--------------|------|
| | Support from immediate manager | | | | Support from senior managers | | | |
| | Excellent | Good | Satisfactory | Poor | Excellent | Good | Satisfactory | Poor |
| Organisation A | 42% | 44% | 12% | 3% | 15% | 52% | 27% | 6% |
| Organisation B | 14% | 39% | 33% | 14% | 2% | 38% | 43% | 17% |

Figure 4 suggests that generally FLMs are content with the support that they receive from their immediate managers and less so about their senior managers. This may be indicative of the fact that a closer relationship is likely to exist with immediate managers and there is generally a more straightforward communication chain in comparison with senior managers.

One of the key findings was that the perception of FLMs regarding the levels of absence in the organisation was poor. Firstly, there was a large amount of missing responses which equated to 21.4% this was very high compared to the average number of missing responses for all of the other questions. This may be because managers were not aware of their own absence levels and/or those of the other comparator groups, despite this information being publicly available. Secondly, out of the given responses (shown in Figure 5) there appears to be a significant issue in that FLMs are underestimating their own levels of absence. Across both organisations the ‘real’ absence figures show that Adult Services has much higher absence levels than those of the Department, Function and across the whole Council, with the biggest variance being the Council-wide figures.

| Figure 5 | | | | | | | | | |
|--|------------------------|-------|-------|----------------------|-------|-------|--------------------|-------|-------|
| Comparison of absence levels of the FLMs team against other internal averages | | | | | | | | | |
| | Within your Department | | | Within your function | | | Across the Council | | |
| | Higher | Lower | Same | Higher | Lower | Same | Higher | Lower | Same |
| Organisation A | 17.4% | 43.5% | 39.1% | 13.3% | 53.3% | 33.3% | 31.0% | 46.0% | 23.0% |
| Organisation B | 13% | 51.3% | 35.9% | 8.1% | 54.1% | 37.8% | 10.3% | 51.3% | 38.4% |

This suggests that FLMs do not have a good understanding of their current performance in terms of levels of absence. This is concerning when it has been identified widely within the organisations as a strategic priority. Communication may play a role in this if the figures are simply not made available at FLM level. It may also indicate that absence levels and targets are not discussed within the current performance management systems.

The literature that has been examined is clear about the importance of return-to-work interviews, so the fact that 83% of FLMs indicated that they do carry them out after every episode of absence is positive. As the majority of FLMs are carrying out the interviews this should in theory lead to a reduction in absences (and particularly non-genuine ones) but this is clearly not the case in either organisation. This may suggest that carrying out the interviews alone is not enough and perhaps there should be a focus on the quality of them by gaining feedback from both parties. Participants who indicated that they did not do this were asked to provide their reasons, two key ones emerged; lack of time to be able to carry them out; and the feeling that it was not necessary after short absences that were considered to be genuine. Although only a small amount of FLMs state that they do not always lead an interview this can still have negative consequences on the organisation as it raises the issue of consistency amongst FLMs.

The focus groups provided some rich qualitative information about why FLMs believe that their staff have higher than average levels of absence. Most of the reasons expressed were directly related to the context and nature of the job that they carry out; the key explanations offered are shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6

- The changing nature of jobs in Social Services including the administrative burden and plethora of performance targets.
- Issues in the 'up-skilling' of some subordinates.
- The environment in which the staff work makes them more susceptible to illness.
- The physical nature of the job and the increasing complexity of the needs of their clients.
- Generosity of the Council's sick pay scheme, with some employees knowing how to 'play the system'.

One of the participants was anxious to point out that she believed that most of the sickness absence in her team was genuine, with a significant amount being specifically related to the job being carried out as it required a lot of physical strength which ultimately led to people requiring time off for musculo-skeletal problems. Many of the participants also commented on the trend of having to deal with more clients who are obese which is again putting a physical pressure on their employees. In addition it was suggested

some teams now have to deal with a lot more complex mental health issues which are quite mentally difficult for employees to deal with and that this had led to an increase in stress-related absence. The final issue that arose surrounding the legitimacy of absences was raised by a manager in charge of residential accommodation and she discussed the fact that sometimes employees could not report for duty in case they passed on infections to their residents, which could have potentially fatal consequences.

The focus groups also reiterated the fact that FLMs appreciate that they have a large role to play in the management of absence, however they did not feel that they always received adequate support from others.

“Managers underestimate how complicated it is to manage absence, I have to find more staff, give them instructions, and supervise them – that is if I can find someone to do an extra shift”

They also emphasised the impact that staff absence can have on clients of the service, particularly on the more vulnerable ones who find it difficult to establish relationships with people. The majority of people revealed that they were aware of occasions where ‘*emotional blackmail*’ had been used as the only way of getting staff to agree to work extra hours, and all of the participants accepted that absence put a strain on the colleagues of the absent employees as well as themselves as FLMs. One respondent revealed that she regularly had to cover the work of absent employees herself and was regularly on ‘*toilet cleaning duties*’ at the expense of carrying out her normal management role.

The FLMs believed that their role in the process (and the time it takes) is underestimated and this is often not taken into account by their own managers, particularly into the amount of related administration that has to be completed. This was demonstrated by one member who commented:

“Every time I have a conversation with someone about absence I make a note of it, if I phone them I keep a record and then when I meet them I have to record it and may have to take actions... If I don’t do this, HR might not support my case, or I might get accused of harassment”

The participants did appear to appreciate the importance of trying to reduce absence but this was because of the practical implications rather than a directive from senior managers and HR.

Conclusions

Some elements of this research agree with the findings of Cabinet Office (2004:3) in that public sector organisations do comply with many best practice interventions such as having a comprehensive policy, carrying out return-to-work interviews and provision of training to FLMs. However as with the UK-wide

research, improvements still need to be made so that organisations are pursuing a joined up approach.

This could include the provision of proactive approaches to encouraging attendance.

Some of the headline results of this research may be perceived as quite positive for the two organisations, however this also presents a problem for the organisation as the reasons behind the higher than average absences remain to some extent unknown. It is therefore difficult to implement 'total' solutions to try and reduce absence levels. This also offers an interesting finding for absence researchers in that there is definitely no 'miracle cure' for absence and even using a range of the best practice interventions does not guarantee success.

Awareness of the importance of absence is crucial and this means that senior managers have to ensure that this is communicated throughout the organisation and particularly to FLMs. This needs to be reinforced by making sure that FLMs are aware not only of absence targets but the impact that absence has on the organisation. They should also be able to see how they compare with others across the organisation and then for the organisation as a whole. This current gap in practice is not exclusively public sector based as CIPD (2006) reported that only 37% of respondents benchmark against other companies, whilst 40% declared that they had official targets. Simply having access to information is not sufficient to emphasise the importance of this area, managing absence should be referred to explicitly within job descriptions and should also feature as a standing performance management feature.

This research provides a consistent picture that FLMs accept their role and understand how this interacts with others; organisations should ensure that this partnership approach continues, particularly if changes are implemented. Reflecting on some of the points that were raised in the focus groups suggests that there are many issues that are context driven due to the nature of work in Adult Social Services. This may account for some of the reasons behind the fact that whilst absence is managed in the same way across the directorates in both organisations, that this department consistently has the highest levels of sickness absence. Wider HR issues need to be considered because of this to address some of the environmental and organisational factors that were raised by the focus group participants.

It was interesting that the survey results reported that in the majority of cases that managers did conduct a return-to-work interview after every absence episode, though it was perceived by the HR professionals

that this may not always be the case. At present neither organisation monitors the carrying out of return-to-work interviews so this may be something that could be introduced as well as when the other tasks are being completed i.e. ensuring that managers are monitoring absence levels and trigger points. This would also enable them to achieve consistency in the performance between FLMs and provide data for use in performance reviews.

All research has limitations and this paper is no exception, one of the principal issues in this type of paper revolves around the fact that the research was client-led which meant that the survey could not reach the depth that may be otherwise used by the researcher. For example; if the participants had been asked to provide details of which specific team they managed in, this could have been correlated with the absence levels at an individual team level. This study is part of a wider research agenda, with the author's ongoing PhD being at the core. This Doctoral research investigates whether the personal and working characteristics of FLMs have a relationship with the absence levels of the employees that they manage. To conclude, yes, managers do appear to be managing absence though whilst there is definite evidence of good practice, there are clearly areas that could be improved upon.

Recommendations for practice

- Within this case study, the context of the department must be taken into account; this could take the form of a review of the working environment in the first instance. Liaising with Occupational Health professionals may identify positive attendance interventions.
- FLMs should be involved in any future revisions to the absence management policy and accompanying procedures.
- Organisations should consider implementing a mandatory training programme for all FLMs which should be regularly repeated. The content of the training should be continuously updated.
- To reflect the vital role that FLMs play, this must be acknowledged by senior managers and should be incorporated into management objectives and the formal performance management process.
- HR must provide FLMs with accurate absence data alongside comparative data and targets,
- Senior managers and HR should engage with FLMs to discuss any issues that have arisen as some of the issues raised in the focus groups for this research proved to be very insightful.

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