Tackling presenteeism at work.
Introduction.

Here, we’ll look at how employees continuing to work unwell or working late because ‘it’s the done thing’ can affect productivity and how you can turn it around.

What we cover

Is presenteeism on the rise?
Page 3

Why is it a problem?
Page 4

What can you do about it?
Page 5
Is presenteeism on the rise?

Research suggests that presenteeism – people continuing to work despite being ill, or continuing to work beyond their working hours – has increased in recent years. Organisations that have taken steps to address the issues have reported benefits for employee productivity and engagement.

Why does presenteeism happen?
Most people take their jobs seriously. It’s natural that we want to meet targets and give a good impression at work. Not being present when others are working can feel like a threat to this. Being off work may mean putting tasks on hold and not being ‘visible’. Being online or in the office and seen to chip in can seem like the safer thing to do. Sometimes, employees may feel as though their job stability depends on it. In other cases, people may just feel that being seen to work extra hard will give them an advantage in terms of career progression.

7 in 10 employees delay seeking medical advice when unwell.

Bupa survey – 524 UK employees were independently surveyed in January 2019 by Opinium Research.
Why is it a problem?

The spreading of illness
Contagious infections such as flu can pass easily between colleagues. It’s much better all-round for people to stay away from the office when they’re unwell, rather than coming in.

Productivity takes a hit
When people work too many hours, they’re unlikely to be their normal, productive selves – especially when they’re unwell. They may find it difficult to concentrate, have less patience with colleagues, or even make mistakes. There can also be the ‘domino effect’ of additional workload caused by one team member not being at their best.

It can be expensive
Evidence suggests that people working while ill costs companies more than sickness absence. Researchers in the US found that when employees with depression or pain continued working, it cost employers more through lost hours of productivity than absence would have.

Over a quarter of employees surveyed who delayed seeking medical advice stated being too busy at work as the reason.

Bupa survey - 524 UK employees were independently surveyed in January 2019 by Opinium Research.
What can you do about it?

Look at workplace pressures
Think about why people might be feeling pressure to work long hours or show up even when they’re ill. Is this a cultural issue that management could address? Could workloads be better balanced?

Rethink your policies
Consider your overall policies around payment and absence. Could anything about these be contributing to presenteeism?

Be more flexible
Take a flexible approach to sickness absence and time off. Encourage people not to come in if you know they’re unwell or give them the option of working from home when they can.

Encourage openness
Try to create an open, honest culture where people feel able to say when they don’t feel their best or need to leave on time.

Stay alert
Be aware of presenteeism and track it if possible. This isn’t as straightforward as measuring absenteeism, but you could include a question about it in a regular team feedback survey, for example.

Proactively manage employee mental health
Since people with mental health issues are found to be particularly susceptible to presenteeism, a proactive approach to the management of stress and related conditions could be particularly key. This could include providing access to an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) or another route to specialist support.

Take a preventative approach
Encouraging people to look after their wellbeing can help them stay well. This could include simple things like providing free fruit to staff or hosting fitness, exercise or mindfulness classes during lunchtime or after work.

Sources
CIPD survey: Presenteeism hits record high in UK organisations as stress at work rises. www.cipd.co.uk, May 2018.
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Find out more

Get information and support on mental health in the workplace
bupa.co.uk/workplace-mental-health

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