

The Truth about Managing Absence

Absence is a very hot topic these days. Try asking any HR or Operations Director (or any manager, for that fact), if they have challenges around unplanned absences and how to reduce their impact. There is never a short answer because the impact is disproportionately large, and recovering from the situations they cause is often expensive, time-consuming and emotional. Something has happened to bring the focus so sharply onto this area, specifically on the impact of unplanned absences.

Studies, and increasingly even live data, are now proving that, whilst the direct salary costs of having someone not working is one way to measure the direct cost of absence, invariably the disruption and 'indirect' costs of absences far outweigh this. And yet, until more recently this information has not been broadly applied in assessing the problem of unplanned absences.

Add to this a tightening economy, and an increasingly competitive marketplace, businesses are needing to protect their margins wherever they can.

Employee Wellbeing, Nurse-based call-centres and outsourced absence services are covering some of the bases, but we will see, in this discussion, that they all rely on the data to drive what they do. If they do not employ technology well, and integrate that tightly into their processes then they are not doing all they could for you. Whilst the case for these services is not being brought into doubt we will see how the data they capture could be put to much more use.

Stages in Managing Absence

The steps in the absence management process, at a macro-level, can broadly be seen as 4 simple stages.

<p>Capture</p> <p>...details of the absence</p>	<p>Who called When they reported the absence Reason for the absence Expected return date</p>	<p>DATA: can be captured direct from intelligent phone-based solutions direct from the employee. Recording absence data as well as <i>when</i> they reported it. Unlike expensive call-centres you can <i>always</i> get through. There are no excuses.</p>
<p>Notify</p> <p>...those that need to know</p>	<p>Line manager HR Project Manager Resource manager Occupational Health team Counselling services</p>	<p>DATA: is passed as immediate notification to all stake-holders. SMS and emails sent to line managers, HR, Occupational Health provide instant information on the absence to anyone that may need to respond, whether they are remote, in a meeting or even ill themselves.</p>

<p>Trigger</p> <p>...the workflows that result</p>	<p>Return to Work Interviews Disciplinary procedures Publish Bradford Score Reports to relevant agencies Permanent Health Insurance claims</p>	<p>DATA: provides the backbone to all triggered workflows. Ensuring RTW interviews are prompted and even recorded, that your protection with PHI is triggered in a timely manner and relevant interventions are systematic and improved.</p>
<p>Report</p> <p>...to the employee</p> <p>...to the manager</p> <p>...to Occupational Health</p>	<p>Their absences Their Bradford score Affect their behaviour</p> <p>Time lost to sickness Average rates of sickness</p> <p>Patterns Priority incidents</p>	<p>DATA: can then be relied upon to be accurate and used to provide all the stakeholders with the information they need. Sharing the information with the employee drives down absence on it's own. The manager can use it to manage absence patterns better, combined with the triggered workflows. Interventions can be prompted based on trends in the data.</p>

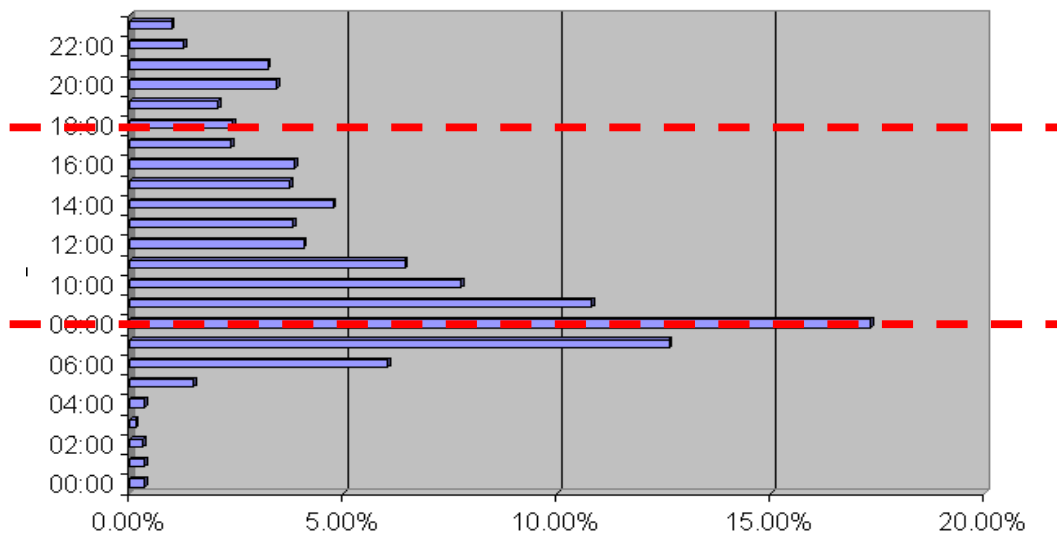
As becomes obvious, each step of the above uses the data captured at the outset. If the data quality is low, the entire system is sub-optimal or even fails. If you do not capture the data completely, accurately and in a real-time manner, the whole system that relies on it has vastly less value to you and your organisation.

To expand upon how triggering systems can improve both employee and manager behaviour, and to show how an organisation can de-risk it's exposure to the problems unplanned absences can cause, here is a simple list of example events which technology can automate triggers for:

- First day of absence (managers, HR)
- Self Certification Period ends (7 Days)
- Statutory Sick Pay starts/ends
- Occupational Health Notification
- HR Intervention trigger - Bradford Score
- Insurance Claim Form (10 -12 weeks)
- Claim Commencement to Payroll
- Return to Work

When do employees call in to registers their absences?

The below data is provided from live absence data-capture solutions in-place across organisations in multiple sectors. It shows that calls come in at all hours. It also shows real peak periods.



Organisations that use call-centres, and especially nurse-based call-centres, pay a premium to have enough bandwidth for these peak times. Using voice-broadcast and capture technology, bandwidth does not become an issue. It is always-on and always available. Furthermore there is no delay notifying all the stakeholders - the technology can do this instantly. This removes 'latency' from the absence management process. In other words, the parts of the process which create gaps in response are minimised, and the actions and interventions are automated and therefore more timely and effective.

This also removes the reliance on HR to 'turn the handle' on the Absence management process, freeing them up to focus on the more important, value-add processes they own. Moving responsibility for managing absence to the Operational parts of the business, puts it closer to home, with the owners of the problem, enabling them to address the process efficiently.

Driving behavioural Change

Unless you are serving the information back to the employee and their manager you are not using your valuable information optimally. Reporting absence data to the board is all very well, but why is it being done? Decisions are made on this data about what to do in response to steadily increasing levels of sickness absence. The initiatives are designed to drive down that absence.

And yet the simplest way to drive down the absence is to serve the data up to the employee and their manager. With dashboards showing such information as *Bradford score against company average* and the *days of the week that my absences fall on*, organisations have driven unplanned absences down by over 14%. This 'bio-feedback' approach is proving very effective.

To conclude, quality data leads to high quality information, which, in turn, leads to improved quality in the management of absence in the organisation.

The results are:

- Better interventions, as the right actions are being automatically triggered
- Reduced employee absence
- More responsive business planning

At the point that you realise you have a single source of the 'truth' about absence - you have the ability to manage it. It is a worthwhile exercise to ask yourself:

- Can I find the data?
- If so, do I trust it?
- If so, is it working for me?

The answer to managing absence is in the data – how it's captured, how it is used to trigger policy and process and how the information it holds is deployed to enable organisational improvement.