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Mondial UK reduces absence and increases productivity

A collaborative approach to managing health and well-being

Jenneh Thomas

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An estimated 25 million days are lost in the UK every year because of sickness absence. According to the UK Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) Absence Management 2005 Survey Report, this equates to 8.4 days per employee. Not only does this cost businesses £1.75 billion, totalling £601 per employee, but it is also a massive disruption to the productivity of any business.

Customer-relationship expert Mondial UK experienced significant absence problems. It estimated that staff absenteeism was costing the business around £500,000 a year.

As an organization offering vital 24/7 claims and assistance services, Mondial UK depends on a high volume of personnel who work shifts in technical and operational roles. Consequently, any absence puts pressure on colleagues who have to deal with larger workloads. This, in turn, presents the company with a significant challenge to both deliver premium customer-care services and achieve its business targets.

Most of Mondial's services – which include travel insurance and assistance, worldwide medical assistance and UK and European roadside motoring assistance – are operated from a number of busy 24/7 call centers. The nature of calls received by Mondial requires skilled operators who are able sensitively and intuitively to ascertain the appropriate level of assistance required and set the wheels in motion to ensure the customer is attended to as quickly as possible.

However, it was these call-center operations that had the highest level of absence in the Mondial business. As a result, not only did this affect service levels, but also shift patterns were affected with other workers having to bridge any gaps caused by absent colleagues. The knock-on effect was that individual employees' shift patterns were misaligned, causing added pressure for those left holding the fort. But probably the most important consequence of absence was the overall impact it had on morale and motivation and, therefore, productivity.

Plan of action

Working together, Mondial UK's executive board and HR department agreed that a new focus on health and well being was required. This needed to be applied across the business, with the goal that it would encourage a better attitude to well being among all employees, at every level and in every area of the business. In particular, it was recognized that there was a need to help individual employees better to manage their health and well being while working shifts.

To achieve this, an absence-management program was implemented at the beginning of 2005.

The program aimed to help line managers in their support of the company's focus on encouraging staff actively to manage their own health. Changes were also made to the

company's performance-related pay (PRP) scheme to address one and two-day frequent absence, rather than penalise those who were genuinely suffering from an illness.

The new absence-management program framework was written by the HR department and approved in principle by the executive board. However, because Mondial believes in a wholly inclusive approach to the working practices and conditions in its business, the program was also presented to the business as a whole. This was done through a working party of managers across the business who reviewed the program to ensure that it was aligned with the company's existing working practices.

Education and support

Probably the biggest hurdle the company needed to overcome was the re-education of managers in how to deal effectively with absence issues and to identify absence that was not genuine.

The first step in achieving this was to ensure that all managers and supervisors attended a workshop that covered the new program, explained how it worked and how best to implement it within their individual teams. Following the workshop, managers were provided with guidelines to help with implementing the program. They were also advised of the progress that needed to be achieved and tasked with advising their staff of the new program and the benefits it would bring them. Line managers were also given specific training in how to deal with absence issues when faced with one-to-one situations with individual employees.

Providing additional support for line managers who were actively managing cases of employee absence, Mondial assigned human-resources business partners (HRBPs) to divisions across the business. This ensured continuity in the support of case management and provided communication trigger points to managers to support them in being proactive in absence cases. Monthly meetings with the HRBP offered additional guidance for managers on how to deal with issues and how to identify any underlying reasons for absence that may not actually be attributed to an illness.

The changes

As part of the criteria for achieving PRP, certain individual absence criteria needed to be met. Before 2005, individuals who were taking more than four occasions of sickness absence received a 50 percent reduction in their PRP. In 2005, Mondial amended the scheme rules by advising individuals that if they took four or more periods of sickness absence they could lose all their PRP.

To ensure the fair application of this criterion, Mondial introduced an appeal panel to adjudicate on any submissions where the individual felt that the period of absence should be discounted for the purpose of PRP. Disability Discrimination Act and pregnancy-related absence were automatically discounted.

Finally, Mondial made better use of its existing health-care scheme by encouraging individuals who otherwise did not take advantage of its benefits to embrace it. As part of the overall absence-management program, Mondial reviewed the components of the scheme

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and updated it to include counselling services and dental care, as well as other health-care initiatives, including subsidised gym membership, HSA and eye-care vouchers.

The results

In 2005, Mondial UK increased its headcount by more than 12 percent, but even taking this growth into account, the company made an annual saving of approximately 10 percent, which amounts to almost £40,000. This is clearly illustrated in the actual number of absent days. For instance, in August 2004 the number of short-term days lost was 415, but for the same month in 2005 it was only 256.

As a company, Mondial is committed to health and safety issues, as well as maintaining a healthy and fit workforce. The introduction of an absence-management program is a natural progression of the company's commitment to its staff and has been hugely successful. While sickness absence has a significant impact on the success of the overall company targets, it also affects teams and ultimately PRP for individuals.

Mondial UK will continue to support individuals who may have health difficulties, and focus on the health and well being of all staff. The company wants to ensure that all employees are committed to achieving the lowest possible level of absence. Mondial UK does not want to penalise individuals who are genuinely ill, but by targeting high-frequency absentees it can manage the pressures staff face and enhance productivity.

The targets and outcomes of the absence-management program were heavily communicated to staff, including being highlighted in the *Mondial Matters* staff newsletter. This identified the progress that each of the departments was making, both visually with graphs and in written reports. These created an increased ownership and responsibility for absences. Staff could see the impact their "Monday flu" was having on their team.

Sickness absence is a very real issue for businesses and one Mondial has placed high on its agenda. Simply put, when the efficiency of a department is reduced as a result of absenteeism, team objectives are not achieved, which in turn affects the success of the company.

The company wants to ensure that all employees are committed to achieving the lowest possible level of absence. Mondial is by no means penalising individuals who are genuinely ill, but by targeting high-frequency absentees the company can manage the pressures its staff face, and enhance productivity.

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