Sick Notes, Short Absences, and Shifting Priorities



For years, the doctor's note has been a staple of workplace absence management in Canada. It's the piece of paper that "proves" someone was sick, keeps the system honest, and gives HR a paper trail if patterns emerge. But as many HR managers are now discovering, that note has become more trouble than it's worth. Across the country, governments are rewriting the rules and, in some provinces, banning employers from requiring medical documentation for short-term absences altogether.

This isn't just an administrative tweak—it's a signal of a larger cultural shift in how we view illness, trust, and time off work. For HR professionals, it's time to get ahead of the change.

Why Governments Are Cracking Down on Sick Notes

The turning point came in health care, not HR. Canadian doctors, already burdened by massive patient loads and paperwork, began sounding the alarm. According to the Canadian Medical Association (CMA), physicians across Canada spend an estimated **19 million hours per year** on administrative tasks that don't improve care. One of the most frustrating, they said, was writing "sick notes" for people who were clearly unwell and only needed a day or two to recover.

The CMA called these notes a "waste of physician time" that diverts resources from patients who actually need medical care. During flu season, clinics see an influx of otherwise healthy people who simply need a note for their employer. That translates into longer wait times, overworked doctors, and unnecessary exposure to contagious illnesses.

In response, governments began to act.

In **Québec**, **Bill 68**—*An Act mainly to reduce the administrative burden of physicians*—took effect in January 2025. It prohibits employers from requiring any document to justify an employee's **first three absences of three days or less** in a twelve-month period. The idea is simple: trust employees for minor illnesses, keep them home to recover, and free up family doctors to see patients with genuine health concerns.

British Columbia followed suit with **Bill 11**, an amendment to its Employment Standards Act. Once regulations are finalized, BC employers will be barred from demanding

doctor’s notes for short-term absences as well. The government has positioned it as both a health care and workplace modernization measure, aimed at cutting “unnecessary paperwork” and promoting trust-based management.

They’re not alone. **Nova Scotia** already restricts medical-note requests to absences longer than five consecutive days, or for repeat short absences. **Ontario’s** Employment Standards Act also bans employers from requiring a doctor’s note for the three unpaid sick days protected by law. Federally regulated employers under the **Canada Labour Code** can only request documentation for medical leaves of five days or more. **Prince Edward Island** has set its threshold at three consecutive days.

Across these jurisdictions, the message is unmistakable: for short absences, stop asking for proof.

What This Means for Employers and HR Managers

For HR teams, this change upends one of the most familiar parts of absence management. The doctor’s note served as both a safeguard and a communication tool. Now, employers must rely on trust, documentation of their own, and consistent policies that reflect the new reality.

The first major impact is procedural. In provinces with new limits, policies that automatically request a doctor’s note for any sick day are now non-compliant. HR will need to update employee handbooks, attendance management procedures, and training materials for supervisors. If your policies say, “a medical certificate is required for all absences due to illness,” that language needs to be rewritten. The new default is: *you can’t ask unless certain criteria are met*.

The second impact is cultural. These laws are as much about trust as they are about paperwork. Governments are signaling that employees shouldn’t be punished for getting sick, and that HR practices should encourage recovery, not attendance at any cost. This reflects a broader shift toward “presenteeism” awareness—the understanding that working while sick can be more damaging than staying home. A 2024 Angus Reid poll found that **two in five Canadians** admit they’ve gone to work sick in the past year because they didn’t want to “let the team down” or feared being questioned about their absence.

That’s exactly the behaviour these new laws aim to prevent.

Communicating the Change: What Managers and Employees Need to Hear

Once policies are updated, communication is everything.

For managers, clarity matters. Supervisors should understand that they can still check in on attendance, track patterns, and follow up when absences become frequent or unexplained—but they can no longer default to “bring me a note.” HR should provide guidance on what constitutes “reasonable evidence” instead. In Ontario, for instance, an employer may ask for proof that’s reasonable in the circumstances—such as an employee’s written confirmation or a completed self-declaration form.

Training should focus on how to balance compassion and consistency. A good manager doesn’t ignore attendance issues, but they also don’t create unnecessary tension when someone catches the flu. Encourage supervisors to ask open questions—“Is there anything we can do to support your recovery?”—rather than defaulting to compliance-driven language.

For employees, communication should emphasize trust and shared responsibility. Let

them know the company recognizes the need for rest and recovery, but that honesty remains essential. Encourage self-reporting of absences early, ideally before the start of a shift, and ensure they understand how to request longer leaves if illness extends beyond the permitted threshold.

The tone matters here. Avoid framing the policy change as a “government rule.” Instead, position it as a company value: “We want to reduce stress for employees who are unwell and support your health without unnecessary paperwork.”

For Jurisdictions That Haven’t Caught Up Yet

Even if your company operates in provinces without formal bans, this is the right moment to modernize your policies.

Waiting until legislation forces the change isn’t strategic. Updating now shows your organization is proactive, health-conscious, and aligned with emerging best practices across Canada.

Here’s how to start:

- Replace blanket doctor’s note requirements with self-declaration forms for absences of three days or less.
- Establish a transparent process for when documentation can be required—typically for longer or repeated absences.
- Include clear guidance on privacy. Remind employees they are never required to disclose the specific diagnosis behind an illness, only that they are medically unfit for work.
- Review benefit plan language to ensure sick leave entitlements align with these new expectations.

You might also consider how these changes intersect with remote or hybrid work. If an employee can perform some duties from home while ill, discuss flexible arrangements instead of forcing “sick or not sick” binary decisions. The key is flexibility backed by trust.

Case Study: The Ripple Effect of Trust

Consider a manufacturing company in Ontario that decided, even before provincial changes, to stop requiring doctor’s notes for the first three sick days each year. Managers were initially skeptical, predicting abuse and higher absenteeism. But after twelve months, their data told a different story: sick-day usage stayed flat, while **unplanned absences dropped by 8%**.

Employees reported higher satisfaction and less anxiety about calling in sick. Supervisors said they spent less time managing paperwork and more time focusing on production planning. Most notably, the company saw fewer workers coming in while contagious—a significant factor during cold and flu seasons.

That’s the real impact of trust-based policy: it protects both employees and operations.

The Bigger Picture: From Compliance to Culture

This legislative wave isn’t about bureaucracy. It’s about humanizing work. The pandemic cracked open conversations about mental health, trust, and what “fit for work” really means. For years, employees have been told to “prove” they’re unwell. Now, the law is catching up with common sense.

The shift also reinforces a truth HR has long understood: compliance and compassion can coexist. When policies are designed with both in mind, they create healthier workplaces that attract and retain talent. In a tight labour market, that matters.

Looking ahead, HR managers who adapt early will be better positioned when the next wave of provinces follows Québec and BC’s lead—which is almost inevitable. In a few years, demanding a doctor’s note for a one-day cold will feel as outdated as requiring employees to fax in a time sheet.

Key Takeaway for HR Leaders

Legislators are removing barriers to care. Physicians are asking for relief from unnecessary paperwork. Employees are asking for trust and respect when they’re unwell.

It’s up to HR to bridge those needs with policies that are fair, compliant, and modern.

If your organization hasn’t revisited its absence management framework lately, now’s the time. The trend is clear: the fewer sick notes you require, the healthier your workplace culture will become.