

Why Employees Misuse Sick Days and What You Can Do About It



Examining some of the complicated facets of managing excessive employee absences

Many surveys and reports inform us that today's employees struggle increasingly with feeling overwhelmed, stressed, or burnt out. Consequently, these employees experience increased mental health concerns. Sometimes these employees are coming to work and other times calling in 'sick'. It can be difficult for an organization to manage employee health and wellness needs while acknowledging that some employees abuse sick leave privileges. Both absenteeism and presenteeism are problems in the workplace. There is no quick fix for either issue.

Is Impracticality the Defining Issue?

The question of what constitutes a legitimate reason to call in sick is not always easy to answer. Does an employee need to have specific physical symptoms that make coming to work impractical? Is solely feeling overwhelmed (short of depression) enough to warrant an employee calling in 'sick'?

In an HR Insider article from last Fall, What Constitutes Misuse of Sick Time in Your Organization, we cited a survey by Kronos that found 54% of Canadians have called in sick when they were not 'sick'. Does that mean they were all faking, or could it be sometimes these were sound decisions to mitigate future health problems?

Most Outrageous Excuses

For perspective we have gathered some of the more outrageous 'what were they thinking' excuses employees offered for taking a sick day from a variety of sources (including Careerbuilder, Workopolis, a Harris Interactive survey).

1. Employee's favorite football team lost on Sunday so needed Monday to recover
2. Employee got sick from reading too much
3. Employee was too upset after watching 'Hunger Games'
4. Employee was suffering from a broken heart
5. Employee caught a cold from his puppy
6. Employee hurt his back chasing a beaver
7. Employee wasn't feeling clever that day
8. Employee said she burnt her mouth on a piece of pumpkin pie
9. Employee fell asleep at his desk, hit his head and got a neck injury

10. Employee stubbed his toe and thinks it is broken

It is humorous to read these. It helps keep things in perspective when your employees call in sick and you question their illness. Other "outrageous" excuses have a ring of truth, but may still raise the ire of an employer. These include:

1. I need to catch up on my sleep
2. I do not feel like working today
3. I need a day to relax
4. My muscles are sore from exercising

You Don't Ask and They Don't Tell

When an employee calls in sick for a day, the best policy is not to ask for any details and to advise your employee not to give any. If your organization does not offer sick leave, the reasons will not matter. If you do offer sick leave you should have a policy that spells out how many days an employee can take without a note from a doctor. No policy should try to spell out what ailments and reasons are legitimate because that would be unmanageable not to mention unenforceable.

Until such time as you feel an employee is taking advantage of sick time by taking excessive amounts of time off or you have tangible information that an employee is abusing the privilege it is best to trust your employees. Consider the quality of their work and their contributions and trust that they know when they need a break.

Sick Days Can Become Health Days

Instead of focusing on sick days and trying to catch an employee who 'just needs a day off' vs. someone who is recovering from an ailment, consider offering a combination of sick days and wellness days and calling them 'Health Days'. These are differentiated from personal days and compassionate care leave, and are simply days to 'promote' better health. This does not excuse employees who abuse these days by taking off 5 days in a row. You can still require verification such as a doctor's note after 2 days, and limit the total number of days per year available to the employee. 'Health Days' can be a more positive way to look at the situation.

Checking Up on Sick Employees

There are times when you do have reason to verify that an employee is not abusing sick time. In a survey conducted by Career Builder, 33% of employers said they checked in on employees who called in sick to make sure the excuse was legitimate. Their methods of checking included: 64% required a doctor's note, 48% called the employee, 19% checked the employee's social media posts, 17% had another employee call the sick employee, and 15% drove past the employee's house.

Taking Actions to Address Misuses of 'Health Days'

If an employee is chronically taking multiple sick days, or frequently takes sick days in a pattern such as every Friday, you should investigate. Your investigation may include trying to determine if there is a reason for their routine absence, such as disability (which can include physical, medical, psychological and even substance abuse). If the employee does not disclose a reasonable explanation, you may have to proceed with disciplinary steps.

If you do discover that an employee is misusing 'health days', address this abuse with a policy that lays out progressive discipline in response. Your policy could include:

- Specific performance and attendance expectations including no absences in the future without a doctors note
- Requiring the employee to count the day as unpaid leave (which requires you to dock corresponding wages)
- Putting the employee on notice including providing a warning letter
- Demoting the employee
- Place the employee on probation
- Providing the employee with additional supervision
- Terminating the employee after you have tried to address the issue

When an employee takes a 'fake' sick day there is usually a reason. The employee may have personal problems or the workplace itself may be part of the problem. While it is important to address the employee's actions it is also important to try and understand what is going on. If you ascertain the employee is simply immature and/or irresponsible and abusing the privilege of taking sick time you may choose take actions to discipline or even terminate that employee.