

Reducing Absence Checklist

Absenteeism on average costs smaller employers £466 per employee, per annum. This direct cost does not take into account the cost of lost productivity to the business. Reducing absenteeism is, therefore, a major concern for all employers. This checklist will help you deal promptly, consistently and fairly with such instances.

Checklist

1. Have a clear absence policy and procedure

It is advisable for employers to implement a policy and procedure on absence. The policy should be clear and unambiguous, and set out how the employer will deal with absence, including unauthorised absence.

If employees are made aware that their employer will investigate unauthorised absences and may invoke its disciplinary procedure, this is likely to deter employees from being absent without a good reason. The absence policy, and the procedures around employee absence, should be communicated to staff in a form that is easily accessible, whether they are included in a staff handbook or published with other policies and procedures on the employer's intranet.

2. Make clear what kind of absence is, and is not, permitted

An absence policy should distinguish between absences that are permitted (ie those for which the employee has a statutory or contractual right, or the employer's permission) and those that are unauthorised where the employee fails to attend work without the employer's permission or a good reason.

Pre-booked annual leave, genuine and correctly reported sickness absence, time off in accordance with a statutory right (for example to care for dependants or carry out public duties) and family-related (e.g. maternity) leave do not amount to unauthorised absence. However, not turning up for work, failing to return from annual leave on the due date, or retrospectively reporting an absence as sickness absence, without a good reason for doing so, constitute unauthorised absence. The absence policy should expressly state that unauthorised absence is not permitted and that the employer may implement its disciplinary procedure if there is no good reason for the unauthorised absence.

3. Make the reporting procedure for all types of unplanned absence clear

Employers should try to ensure that their employees are aware of the procedure that they should follow to report all unexpected absences. If an employee is unable to attend work, he or she should be required to contact the employer as soon as possible to report the absence and provide a reason for it. Employers should make clear to whom employees should report, how and by what time, and that if they fail to act in accordance with the employer's procedure on absence reporting this may result in disciplinary action (unless there is a good reason for the employee's failure to report absence correctly, for example serious illness or an accident).



4. Investigate absences quickly

If an employee fails to attend work and does not contact the employer, the employer should act quickly. Early intervention is important and the employer should make reasonable and prompt efforts to contact the employee to try to ascertain the reason for the absence. If the employer's attempts to make contact with the employee fail, it should investigate further, for example by trying to contact the employee's next of kin and asking his or her colleagues if they know the employee's whereabouts. Employers should record the attempts that they have made to contact an absent employee and the information obtained as a result of the investigation into the absence. If and when the employee returns to work, the employer should meet him or her as soon as possible to discuss the situation and the reason for the absence. By asking open questions the employer may discover that there are underlying problems, for example that the employee is suffering from stress or is being bullied or harassed at work, which the employer will need to investigate further.

5. Deal with absenteeism consistently and fairly through the disciplinary procedure

Unauthorised absence without a good reason is normally a disciplinary matter and employers should, where appropriate, use their disciplinary procedure to address it and make their staff aware of the consequences of taking unauthorised absence. Employers should apply their absence policy fairly and consistently when deciding whether or not to invoke the disciplinary procedure, or risk liability for unfair dismissal and/or discrimination claims. Clearly, the level of disciplinary action that is appropriate in respect of unauthorised absence depends on the circumstances of each case, including the length of, and reason for, the absence.

6. Monitor levels of unauthorised absence

It is advisable for employers to monitor all absence levels, including unauthorised absence. The fact that an employer monitors and records unauthorised absence may act as a deterrent against its employees being absent without permission in the first instance, particularly if they know that they will have to attend a meeting and justify the reason for their absence on their return to work. In addition, monitoring is useful for helping employers to detect underlying problems, whether at home or work. For example, a pattern of unexplained absences, or absences for reasons that are unconvincing, may indicate that there is a problem with workplace bullying that the employer needs to investigate.

7. Facilitate working from home if possible, where attendance at work may be a problem

Where an employee is able to perform his or her role from home and the employer is aware that the employee will have problems attending work on a particular day due to domestic or travel difficulties it is advisable for it to allow the employee to work from home if he or she has requested to do so. Employers that allow employees to work from home, on occasion, are likely to experience a lower level of unauthorised absence, than those that do not. If the employer does not allow the employee to work from home, the employee may be left with no option but to be absent anyway. Unless the absence resulted from a statutory right to take time off, it would amount to an unauthorised absence.

