

Sick and at work? The hidden benefits

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Being at work while you are ill may not be such a bad thing after all, suggests a new report on so-called 'Presenteeism' by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) released today. The report challenges the idea that workers have to be 100 per cent fit before going back to work and argues that the workplace can have a beneficial effect on rehabilitation and recovery, even for workers with serious health conditions.

The report, 'Presenteeism: A Review of Current Thinking' by IES Principal Associate Dr Valerie Garrow, looks at research from across the world on the causes and impact of 'Presenteeism' – defined as 'showing up to work when one is ill'. While the report acknowledges that Presenteeism can be a negative phenomenon (risking cross-infection and increasing the chances of making some health conditions worse) it also suggests that employers should look at the positive benefits of some Presenteeism at work.

'Of course we don't want people to endanger their health further by coming to work unnecessarily' said Dr Garrow today, 'however, our report shows very clearly that if people with ill-health are on the journey back to work after an illness or injury, having access to a phased or graduated return to work where they perform reduced duties or work fewer hours can benefit both them and their employer.'

The report highlights that people with some forms of mental illness, those who have financial worries, and those fearful of losing their jobs are among the workers most likely to go to work when they are ill. It acknowledges that, in many cases, Presenteeism can be damaging to health and also represents a hidden cause of reduced productivity – becoming an even bigger burden than sickness absence from work in some sectors.

Commenting on the report Professor Stephen Bevan, Head of HR Research Development at IES, said 'this report challenges employers to create environments where people with health problems feel confident to disclose them to their bosses so that they can get the help they need to use a gradual return to work to build their confidence and speed up recovery. For some conditions a good-quality job and a supportive boss can have genuinely therapeutic benefits and, for many people, being away from work for weeks can undermine their physical and psychological health.'

The report argues that, although Presenteeism as workers recover and return to work can represent a short-term reduction in productivity, it can also increase the chances of making a speedy and sustained return to full capacity. The report also acknowledges that managing Presenteeism positively can be a challenge to line managers and supervisors. Dr Garrow explained:

'The difficulty for line managers is that it can often require talking about sensitive subjects, which calls for trust that the line manager has the employee's best interests at heart. The situation often demands some knowledge of the illness itself; what to expect and how to respond. Line managers need to balance the interests of the individual with those of the team. All this means that line manager training

and their collaboration with Occupational Health and HR is critical. They need to feel confident that they are acting appropriately, and giving correct guidance to their staff.'

ENDS

Notes to editor

The report will be published on Thursday, 19 May, 2016.

Press copies are available on request beforehand.

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The report

Presenteeism: A review of current thinking will be available to download on Thursday, 19 May, at:
www.employment-studies.co.uk/presenteeism (<http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/presenteeism>)

Professor Stephen Bevan

Professor Stephen Bevan is available for interviews. He was an advisor to the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) 'Sickness Absence Review' and has conducted many studies on the costs and consequences of ill-health in the UK workforce.

About the Institute

The Institute for Employment Studies is the UK's leading independent centre for research and evidence-based consultancy in employment, labour market and human resource policy and practice. It is apolitical and not-for-profit, its activities being funded through research and consultancy commissions, and from its corporate membership programme. The Institute aims to improve employment policy in the UK and internationally by carrying out authoritative research of practical relevance to policy makers and those responsible for implementing policy programmes and initiatives.