

Briefing



ICAS WELLBEING

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How stress differs in the public and private sector

Year in year out, the CBI/AXA absence and labour turnover survey highlights the yawning gap in sickness absence levels between the public and private sectors. According to the latest report, public sector workers took an average 9 days off work sick a year compared with 5.8 days for their private sector counterparts – a gap that, if it could be plugged, would save taxpayers some £1.3bn.

But there may be good reasons for the difference. The HSE claims that it is mainly down to differences in demographics and employer size: with public sector employers tending to be larger organisations and or with a greater proportion of older and female employees* – all factors linked with higher levels of sickness absence.

When it comes to work-related stress (a perennial culprit for public sector sickness absence), the HSE believes that job role is a key issue – public sector employees who regularly have to deal directly with members of the public (people working in criminal justice, local government, health/social services and education, for instance) are more likely to claim their work is stressful than people who work in the private sector.

As AXA's latest Workplace Stress Survey shows, stress is still a bigger issue for the public sector. There are clear differences in how public and private sector employers are trying to deal with it and, more worryingly, a striking difference in their outcomes.

While public sector employers seem to be making the right noises and ticking the right boxes, when it

comes to performance they come second.

276 practitioners (mostly HR directors, heads and managers) completed the AXA sponsored survey undertaken by HR Magazine: 28% worked in the public sector (mainly in health/social care, education and local government) whilst those working in the private sector came mainly from the professional services, manufacturing, IT/high tech, financial services and retailing sectors.

When asked where employee stress was coming from, public sector HR managers were more likely to blame it on work related issues – 59% compared with 33% of their private sector counterparts. Is work so different in both sectors?

When it came to the way line managers actually deal with individual cases of stressed employees, public sector line managers were far likelier to refer them for counselling (65% versus 29%) or to occupational health (70% versus 29%). The latter probably reflects the greater availability of OH support in the public sector – 74% of public sector respondents confirmed they have access to OH services compared with 43% of those working in the private sector; this is an area where the private sector can learn from the public sector.

A sizeable minority of line managers from both sectors were said to refer stressed employees to their GPs for help (30% and 27%, respectively) – a potentially worrying finding that may result, unnecessarily, in the medicalisation of what may well be organisational and/or personal issues that could be managed more effectively.



So, what does this tell us? That public sector employers are, seemingly, on the ball when it comes to drawing up and implementing stress management policies, and are more proactive in referring stressed employees to specialist services such as counselling and OH. And that the private sector is falling well behind the public sector in its provisions. Yet, despite this, the headline figure – 82% of public sector respondents reckon stress is a problem in their organisation – suggests that something is amiss.

Stress is evidently a bigger issue for the public sector and whilst it may be the case, as argued by the HSE, that public-facing work is inherently more stressful for public sector workers a nagging doubt remains that there's more to it than that. Workplace culture may also be at play.

Indeed the survey revealed a considerable gap in trust between employees and managers in the public sector – 53% of public sector respondents didn't believe that employees trust the people at the top in their organisations (versus 18% for the private sector),

25% agreed that their managers don't do enough to recognise employees' achievements (versus 18% in the private sector) and, as a proxy for workplace morale, only 42% agreed that people had a lot of laughs in their organisation (versus 58% in the private sector).

The private sector should not sit on its laurels, however; it remains behind the public sector in many of its provisions and needs to address this. In addition it appears that it needs to train its managers more in absence management, and how to manage stress cases at work, particularly in knowing how and when to make appropriate referrals.

Finally, it's not what you do but the way that you do it ... Having all the tools available to help to manage stress is not enough: employers need to use them more effectively. A joined up approach to sickness absence management, occupational health and EAPs, together with vocational rehabilitation - focused on the same goals and pulling together - should result in much better outcomes.

*www.hse.gov.uk/sicknessabsence/swash2005.pdf

Flexibility improves commitment



It is becoming more and more important for people in today's world to achieve a proper work-life balance. Employees are increasingly taking on a greater number of responsibilities and demands both inside and outside of the workplace, while employers need to keep a skilled and productive workforce. It is up to organisations to be willing to adapt in order to stay competitive in the changing business world.

From 6 April last year, a new law gave carers of adults the right to request flexible working from their employers. A right to request flexible working was first introduced in 2003 for parents of children under six years of age (or under 18 for a disabled child). It is not an absolute right to work flexibly but does require employers to consider requests seriously.

This proved a great success for parents with 47 per cent of new

mothers working flexibly after the legislation came in, compared to 17 per cent in 2002. In addition the number of new fathers working flexibly has tripled (Carers UK). The legislation introduced last year builds on this success by extending similar rights to employees who care for, or expect to care for, adults.

Currently, more than three million people – one in seven of the workforce – juggle the responsibilities of caring and work. This can be extremely stressful and it is perhaps not surprising that in the past, one in five carers would have given up work to care full-time. It is likely that many of these employees would have been your most valuable staff – the 40+ year olds at the peak of their careers. There is a strong business case for introducing flexible working. By recognising the special needs of carers, you can hold on to your experienced staff and avoid the costs of recruitment and training. Other benefits can also include higher staff morale, improved future recruitment, improved company image, greater productivity and lower absenteeism.

Businesses can take simple and effective action to help carers fulfil their caring duties and as a result retain the services of valued employees. Having a flexible benefits package enabling employees to select the most useful benefits for their individual circumstances, such as disability/healthcare insurance and care vouchers, can be a helpful initiative. Emergency leave is important to carers, who can be called home at short notice when care arrangements break down.

Other useful leave arrangements include compassionate leave, or a system of planned leave, for example, to provide nursing care following discharge from hospital. Paid leave for emergency or planned caring can cut staff turnover, absence and employment costs. The evidence from employers themselves shows that it is rarely abused and increases people's loyalty and commitment.

To find out more contact sales@axa-icas.com or call 0800 17 0800

Do you know who is absent today?

It's widely accepted that while sickness absence is an increasingly topical issue, it is also a complex problem with no silver bullet to help employers deal with the impact of absence on their business. There are a wide range of providers in the market who claim to be able to help manage absence, however their solutions are often either too expensive or more marketing spin than reality. Because of this, it may be tempting to put managing sickness absence in the 'too difficult' pile!

According to the Work Foundation, there are a number of basic steps that employers can take to help mitigate the cost, productivity and performance impact that unplanned employee absence undeniably causes.

These include getting board level commitment to dealing with the problem, monitoring and measuring absence levels, setting targets, instilling management accountability,

analysing absence data, managing absence when it happens and providing wider health promotion initiatives.

The good news is that AXA ICAS can now provide you with practical and cost effective help in putting these basics in place.

Our sickness absence management (SAM) service is a telephone and technology based solution designed to automatically capture details of all absences, notify and empower management, and create an absence database and audit trail.

As well as recording details of an employee's absence, SAM even provides seamless access to employee support services – for example an employee assistance programme - at the end of the call registering their absence.

Once an absence has been recorded, SAM sends immediate

notifications to designated individuals (typically the employee's line manager) together with trigger alerts to highlight those absences which may warrant further attention or support such as:

- employees with frequent spells of absence
- prospective long term absence
- musculoskeletal and psychological problems
- accidents

This means that individuals can no longer slip through disciplinary or support nets, and the detailed management information ensures that both line and senior management can track and benchmark absence throughout the organisation.

The management of absence can be a weakness within some managers, and our Positive Attendance Management training programme will help them develop their skills to undertake this vital role in this important daily task.



In short, SAM is flexible and easy to use, empowers management, facilitates early intervention and eliminates the administrative effort and inconsistencies associated with absence recording. When linked to our training or other intervention services, SAM can help to reduce the level of absence.

To find out how SAM can help you reduce the burden of absence call 0800 17 0800 or www.axa-icas.com/absencemanagement

HOT TOPIC . . .

Smoking Ban - one year on

While the ban on smoking in the workplace has made people healthier, it also appears to have made smokers less productive, reported People Management, 10th July 2008 issue.

Almost three-quarters (71 per cent) of company bosses and HR professionals surveyed by Employment Law Advisory Services have seen a drop in productivity owing to staff taking more frequent or longer cigarette breaks. What's more, five per cent of the 1,110 respondents admitted to allowing staff to smoke indoors to encourage them to work harder, despite this being a criminal offence. On the plus side, 82 per cent have seen a reduction in sick leave.

If the health benefits are not enough to encourage a smoker to kick the habit, maybe the financial savings will. A recent report by the Alliance and Leicester claims that a '20 a day' smoker giving up one year ago, would have saved just under £2,200.

Details of the AXA ICAS Smoking Cessation service are available from sales@axa-icas.com or call 0800 17 0800

Call to protect workers from RSI

More needs to be done to protect workers from repetitive strain injury (RSI), physios' union CSP has warned. It says RSI rates have been rising in recent years and the problem now costs the UK economy £300m a year in lost working time, sick pay and administration.

Health and Safety Executive statistics cited by the union show that there were 115,000 new cases last year – up from 86,000 on the year before. The figures revealed that rather than being a problem just for office staff using computers constantly, construction workers such as carpenters and painters were also at high risk.

CSP is calling on the government to promote the use of occupational health therapists in the workplace, adding that employers need to make sure staff have regular breaks and risk assessments are carried out. Many thousands of people are suffering and employers are losing hundreds of millions of pounds every year through RSI. This is unnecessary as RSI can often be avoided with advice on appropriate equipment and safe working practices from occupational health physiotherapists.

AXA ICAS is able to provide clients with a broad range of health & safety support services. Contact us on 0800 17 0800 for more information.

Bullying and harassment

Bullying and harassment has long been an issue in the workplace, nationally and internationally. From a number of surveys it appears to be on the increase, although the reasons behind the statistics are open to debate.

In many organisations bullying and harassment complaints are taken seriously and are dealt with objectively and fairly, based on the Company's 'good practice' policy with the complaint being processed through the formal Grievance Procedure.

However the Grievance Procedure is often seen by employees as high profile and career limiting, reducing the likelihood that any victims of bullying and harassment will make a formal complaint. Providing a process within the policy to combat bullying and harassment which reflects the Grievance Procedure but is separate from it, offers a less intimidating option and clarifies the difference between a grievance against the company and a grievance against an individual.

Bullying and harassment is a behavioural issue, people bully, organisations don't.

In other companies complainants are made to feel that they have

misinterpreted the other person's actions, that they are being over sensitive or even that they are a nuisance, and therefore that they are the problem. Yet any form of behaviour which leaves the recipient feeling humiliated, distressed, or intimidated clearly reflects the definitions of harassment and bullying laid out in various employment based laws and codes of practice, and needs to be investigated effectively and sensitively.

Within their duty of care and as a means of protecting the company's interests, employers have a crucial part to play in reducing bullying and harassment in the workplace, and the combination of a four pronged approach works well.

One of these four on its own is unlikely to tackle bullying and harassment effectively, and any approach is more likely to be effective if it is rolled out as part of an integrated people development strategy.

AXA ICAS Consultancy and Training Services provide a wide range of options to support employers in encouraging an inclusive, safe and open work based culture.

From support with policy development to behavioural based

workshops designed to tackle bullying and harassment in a way which is acceptable, fun and has a positive impact on relationships.

We also offer mediation where a safe and confidential environment might help the parties to understand the others perspective and agree how to rebuild their relationship and work together more effectively.

We work with you to ensure managers and non-managers are aware of their role in combating bullying and harassment, increasing staff wellbeing and protecting staff and the organisation from potential litigation.



Four way approach to Bullying and Harassment

1. Communicate policy and processes to all employees providing a clear message that such behaviour will not be tolerated, whether with a diversity, dignity and inclusion focus or aimed specifically at bullying and harassment.
2. Raising awareness of what is and what is not inappropriate behaviour.
3. Clarifying employees' rights and responsibilities. For example the right to a physically and psychologically safe working environment, and the responsibility to report any concerns in this area to the appropriate (identified) person.
4. Monitoring and following through to provide regular reminders encouraging people to consider whether their behaviour is appropriate.

Dates for your diary



CIPD Annual Conference & Exhibition

International Conference Centre, Harrogate

16th – 18th September 2008

Visit AXA ICAS on stand A70 where you can find out more about our employee support, sickness absence management and occupational health services. Enter our prize draw for the chance to win one of two fantastic prizes.

FireFit Conference

Liverpool Marriott Hotel South

1st and 2nd September 2008

Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service are hosting the FireFit Conference in 2008.

Employee Well-being Forum

CBI Conference Centre, London

23rd October 2008

This event will focus on measuring and maintaining employee well-being initiatives whilst developing a resilient and productive workforce.

Visit the AXA ICAS stand to find out more about AXA ICAS Employee Assistance and Wellbeing services.

Royal College of Nurses Conference

AXA ICAS will be exhibiting at the Royal College of Nurses Conference and Exhibition from 26th to 27th November, at Southport Convention Centre.

For more information on AXA ICAS Events visit www.axa-icas.com/events

Maternity leave survey



AXA ICAS in partnership with Managing Maternity Limited are inviting Human Resources and Diversity Professionals across the UK to take part in our annual benchmarking survey into workplace practice on maternity management and retention.

Managing Maternity 2008 will provide a unique and comprehensive insight into how organisations are dealing with maternity, Keeping In Touch days, flexible working and strategies to boost retention.

It is straightforward and quick to complete, and a free copy of the report and findings will be available for all participant organisations.

To complete the survey visit www.axa-icasextra.com/survey

Create a healthy work environment

Whilst not all stress occurs at work, the environment in which we work plays a significant role in determining our overall levels of wellbeing.

It is well known that a healthy working environment is conducive to motivating employees and enhancing productivity.

Cost effective and easy to implement

AXA ICAS can help you determine the type of pressures that exist within your organisation and can pinpoint where these pressures pose a potential risk to the wellbeing of your employees. AXA ICAS has recently joined forces with health-e-solutions Ltd, a leading-edge UK software data analysis company, to offer you

a simple, easy and cost-effective way of carrying out wellbeing risk assessments within your organisation.

The survey is conducted online ensuring a quick and efficient process, which can be completed in around a month; and because it is fully web-enabled we can monitor the responses by location or department to help you maximise the response rates overall.

Compliant with HSE recommendations

The survey incorporates all questions currently contained within the Health & Safety Executive's own Indicator Tool with the advantage of customising it to your needs with

questions specific to your organisation.

Additional benefits include the ability to benchmark results with industry norms where available. The health-e-solutions Ltd database can compare your ratings with the Health & Safety Executive norms as well as data from similar organisations. Using the considerable knowledge of AXA ICAS in the area of behavioural risk management, we can interpret your results and make recommendations for improvement.

To find out more about AXA ICAS stress management services, contact us on 0800 17 0800 or email sales@axa-icas.com

