

Under pressure

Work-related stress is a perennial culprit in public sector sickness absence rates. But while frontline jobs dealing with the public may be inherently more stressful, a niggling doubt remains that there's more to it than that, says Eugene Farrell

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 nine 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 Health and Safety Executive (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 – factors linked with higher levels of sickness absence.

And, when it comes to work-related stress (a perennial culprit for public sector sickness absence), the HSE says job roles are 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 in the private sector.

There are clear differences in how public and private sector employers deal with stress 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.

The AXA-sponsored survey undertaken by HR magazine showed that stress remains stubbornly intractable, with 82 per cent of public sector respondents rating it as a problem versus 63 per cent of their private sector counterparts.

Public sector employers were more likely to have specific policies in place for managing workplace stress and to undertake audits to identify the causes.

Public sector HR managers were far likelier to blame stress on work-related issues and also far likelier to refer stressed employees for counselling or to occupational health. The latter probably reflects the greater availability of such support in the public sector.



STRESSED OUT: "stress remains stubbornly intractable"

A sizeable minority of line managers from both sectors referred stressed employees to their GPs for help – a potentially worrying finding that may result, unnecessarily, in medicalisation of what may well be organisational and/or personal issues that could be better managed otherwise.

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. Yet, despite this, the headline figure – 82 per cent of public sector respondents say stress is a problem in their organisation – suggests that something is amiss.

Bleaker still, despite the interventions, when asked what had become of employees who had taken time off work with stress in the past 12 months, 59 per cent of public sector respondents

said some of them were still signed off work sick (versus just 18 per cent in the private sector). Similarly, 30 per cent said stressed employees had taken early ill-health retirement (which can be costly) during this time, compared with just 8 per cent in the private sector.

Lack of resources could be part of the problem; 34 per cent in the public sector said they needed more resources and a further 11 per cent believed that their organisations were so badly managed that no amount of money could remedy them (versus 27 per cent and 7 per cent, respectively, for the private sector).

Stress is evidently a bigger issue for the public sector and while public-facing work may be inherently more stressful a niggling 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 per cent of public sector respondents didn't believe that employees trust the people at the top in their organisations (versus 18 per cent for the private sector), 25 per cent agreed that managers don't do enough to recognise employees' achievements (versus 18 per cent in the private sector) and, as a proxy for workplace morale, only 42 per cent agreed that people had a lot of laughs in their organisation (versus 58 per cent in the private sector).

Employees can and do vote with their feet (or, in HR argot, exercise discretionary effort) and take time off sick in badly managed, dysfunctional workplaces. It would be salutary for public sector employers to take stock and ask how their managers measure up on the key management behaviour for preventing and reducing workplace stress that London University researchers recently identified for the HSE. Eighteen behaviour categories were highlighted, including managing workload and resources, dealing with work problems, process planning, empowerment and so on.

A big opportunity gap could be bridged if public sector employers were to make a bigger investment in the softer people skills that line managers need to strengthen employee resilience and engagement.

Finally, don't forget that it's not what you do but the way that you do it. Having all the tools available to manage stress is not enough. Employers need to use them more effectively. A joined-up approach to sickness absence management, occupational health, personal counselling and employee assistance programmes, together with vocational rehabilitation – all focused on the same goals and pulling together – should result in much better outcomes.

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