



XpertHR Podcast

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Ellie Gelder:

Hi and welcome to this week's XpertHR podcast with me, Ellie Gelder. Now managing sickness absence effectively should be a key priority for line managers, but how are line managers being trained in how to navigate the various pitfalls of managing staff absence? With me today to discuss the results of XpertHR's latest survey on training line managers in managing absence is senior HR Practice Editor, Noelle Murphy. So first off, Noelle, can you just give us an overview of the findings? [0:00:37.9]

Noelle Murphy:

Well I suppose the first thing is that this is a survey that we conduct regularly on XpertHR and this year we spoke to more than 330 HR practitioners. For me the finding that stands out is that despite us knowing and having been shown that training line managers in managing absence shows itself to be the most effective way to secure engagement and understanding and, as such, reducing sickness absence, as many as four in ten HR practitioners are not in a position to offer any training in this area.

Ellie Gelder:

That is quite a large proportion that can't. So what is the reason for that, that you've found? [0:01:16.8]

Noelle Murphy:

One of the recurring themes we hear from our HR community when you speak to them about this is the issue they have securing resources and commitment from both senior and line managers. It's a problem to get line managers to make time to attend the training, so they have difficulties when they set up training if it's not mandatory to ensure that line managers will attend. But also there is this ongoing tension around whose job it is to manage absence. HR believe it is the role of line managers, whereas line managers are happy to hand it over, wherever possible, back to HR.

Even where there is no formal training in place, though, HR has to be sure that where absence management is the responsibility of line managers, they have to have the necessary skills to do it correctly and compliantly. I suppose we would see absence management training for line managers to be a bit like first aid training. Even though it's not something they do every day, they do need to keep their skills and knowledge up-to-date, so that when something does happen, they are in a position to be able to manage it effectively.

The other thing that we found that many of our respondents who aren't offering training do plan to do so within the next twelve months. But this tends to be something that we find every time we do this

survey, so where they can't at the moment offer the training, they say it's certainly on the agenda to do so within the next twelve months.

Ellie Gelder: But presumably they are still trying to get buy-in from higher up in the organisation to justify the costs of that training being mandatory?
[0:02:47.2]

Noelle Murphy: That's right. So there is the cost of the training, but also there is taking the line managers away from their job.

Ellie Gelder: So where training is offered, what does it tend to usually cover?
[0:02:59.0]

Noelle Murphy: Without any shadow of a doubt the thing that is generally across the board is building line manager confidence in dealing with sickness absence. So that's building their confidence in having difficult conversations during return to work interviews, but also the competence in identifying when intervention from third parties is required. We've found that there are different approaches taken to training line managers in dealing with short-term sickness absence, and long-term sickness absence.

So the basic is getting to grips with return to work interviews, and covering what needs to be covered in a return to work interview. Now that, in its own right, can be a complicated affair, but then you move on...for long-term sickness absence, it's as much about case management – how you deal with that, what you do about phased return to work and, more importantly, when somebody has a condition that, potentially, might be covered by the Equality Act, what kind of approach is a line manager supposed to take?

There's a huge amount there to be covered, really. So you can understand, in some ways, why HR have a bit of an issue in encouraging line managers to engage with the breadth of that kind of training.

Ellie Gelder: Not burying their heads in the sand when it's something complicated like long-term sickness? [0:04:13.8]

Noelle Murphy: Well, yes, and it might be a condition that they are very unfamiliar with, they may have no knowledge of.

Ellie Gelder: I guess mental health springs to mind, doesn't it? When a line manager might not feel comfortable with dealing with that, asking how someone is, how someone is coping? [0:04:31.5]

Noelle Murphy: Well, yes. I mean the whole thing can be very complicated, because something like mental ill-health can present so differently depending on somebody's personality or characteristics etc. So that's difficult enough, but if somebody has been signed off on long-term sickness absence, with mental ill-health, then it can be very difficult for a line manager to engage comfortably with the employee and encourage a phased return to work and it can be very much a hands-off approach, due to lack of understanding and not being comfortable in dealing with the situation. And it's not something that's easy from either side, really. It's not something like HR have all the answers. But one of the respondents we heard from told us they had started to do work with

MIND, the mental health charity, so they had started to work with them to kind of raise awareness within the organisation amongst all employees, but also working with line managers to look at early warning signs and give them the skills to know when the signs are such that you should try and speak to the employee directly about what's going on.

Ellie Gelder: That's interesting they're getting an external party to help them with that. Like you say, HR doesn't always have the answers. So do you think we'll see more of that? [0:05:47.4]

Noelle Murphy: Well I don't know. It's interesting, isn't it? I think we would say that the political picture this year has raised awareness around mental health etc. and particularly mental health in the work place. We know stress is a big cause of sickness absence and, as such, will have a significant cost to employers. So we kind of get the impression that this is something that HR really want to engage with, so that they can hand it over to line managers and be confident that line managers can perform their role effectively. But it seems like every year something more pressing comes along that has to be dealt with and training line managers and managing absence gets put on the long finger again.

Ellie Gelder: What have our HR community told us actually works in terms of creating a culture that supports training line managers in this area? [0:06:37.0]

Noelle Murphy: Well they're very clear that there needs to be commitment from the top. It needs to be a top down process that everyone buys into and is committed to. And that's very easy to say. Every initiative, pretty much, that you introduce needs to have support from the top and needs top down process...

Ellie Gelder: And how are they doing that? How are they getting buy-in from the top? [0:06:56.9]

Noelle Murphy: Well I suppose one of the biggest things that they can do is demonstrate to senior management how much absence is costing them on a day-to-day basis.

Ellie Gelder: And we know that's costing...? [0:07:07.7]

Noelle Murphy: So our own survey would put that cost at an average of £648 per employee per year.

Ellie Gelder: It adds up. [0:07:14.9]

Noelle Murphy: It adds up. And there's a business case right there for getting the investment.

Ellie Gelder: Yes. Not to mention the other aspects. [0:07:22.1]

Noelle Murphy: That's right. Well that's just the cost on a day-to-day basis, that's not measuring the impact it has on those who remain and looking at engagement levels or morale amongst employees. But I suppose it's not a very exciting initiative. Effective absence management needs to be supported by a culture of encouraging employee wellbeing.

Ellie Gelder: And creating consistency as well, which must be a challenge. [0:07:46.8]

Noelle Murphy: Well, yes.

Ellie Gelder: You've got different personalities, different line managers. [0:07:50.2]

Noelle Murphy: Yes. What can be as damaging to effective absence management is the overzealous line manager as much as the line manager who kind of hasn't got a real interest or desire to engage with the process. And I suppose the difficult thing is that HR have been trying to offload this, so it's kind of where the policing aspect of it...no I don't like to use that word which it comes to HR at all, but kind of just overseeing it so that we know that things are done consistently. Because you have to be absolutely sure that every employee pretty much has the same experience in how their sickness absence is managed. Otherwise you could be letting yourself open to some issues there, particularly if somebody has a condition or something that's covered under the Equality Act.

Ellie Gelder: So we talked about buy-in from the top, so the other things that work in creating that supportive culture are...? [0:08:45.8]

Noelle Murphy: It's that thing we were talking about there is that while HR are keen to offload, they still need to be proactively involved to ensure things like the consistency, to ensure that standards don't drop, to ensure that everybody is doing the same thing and that everybody who has had sickness absence has, as much as possible, the same kind of experience.

Ellie Gelder: And so presumably line managers need to be trained in when they need to get HR's input? Before things escalate. [0:09:14.1]

Noelle Murphy: That's one of the things that's difficult to capture in a policy. Because a certain amount of it has to be down to the line manager and how well they know the employee etc. and how much they can identify is a deviation from the norm within this employee's personality. And they so, say, for example they are off on sickness absence for four weeks, but it's a pre-planned surgery and recovery, then you wouldn't necessarily need to involve HR, although there would have to be a return to work plan or a phased return to work plan put in place.

That's a thing that is difficult to capture in a policy, but we know from speaking to the HR community, they find that role-playing these things in small groups with line managers is something that works effectively. So presenting them with scenarios and giving them the time and the space to kind of learn from each other and explore how they would deal with particular situations. But it's down to the culture, again, really I think in that effective absence management doesn't need to be a punitive thing, it can be something that supports and encourages employees to be open about why they need absence.

Ellie Gelder: So communication is key? [0:10:25.8]

Noelle Murphy: It really is. It's communication between the line manager and the employee, but also communication when it's relevant between the line manager and HR or any other third party. I suppose one of the

messages that was very clear to us as well from the HR community is that managing sickness absence is one thing, but also managing absence for reasons other than sickness and not annual leave. So, for example, if somebody has a domestic emergency at home or a child who is off sick then they should be able to contact their line manager, rather than just ringing in sick themselves and outline the situation and have the opportunity, potentially, to work from home or take leave at very short notice without feeling like they're letting anybody down.

Ellie Gelder: So a culture of trust as well. [0:11:19.5]

Noelle Murphy: Yes. And that doesn't happen overnight. And, again, I suppose that's where we were looking at creating a culture of employee wellbeing, so that's about supporting employees, helping them to look after themselves, but also being realistic. And this is very much the message from HR, supporting them...one of them described as supporting employees and their chaotic home lives and trying to balance that with work as well. So HR are very aware of the realities that people face and welcome policies that allow them the flexibility to support employees during that time.

Ellie Gelder: So we talked about making training mandatory is quite hard because other priorities creep in, but do you think in time when HR gets buy-in from the top that we could see training becoming mandatory? [0:12:10.1]

Noelle Murphy: I suppose in all the time we've been doing this, the one thing that has changed for sure is the emphasis on employee wellbeing and that is very much a priority and it's certainly something that is talked about a lot, not only within the HR community, but further afield. But I would have to balance that with the fact that every year we ask our respondents if they would like to see the training as mandatory and every year it's over 70% tell us that they would like to, but it's such a small proportion that actually our position that it is mandatory...there's a bit of a disconnect there.

Ellie Gelder: So watch this space. You would normally repeat the survey...? [0:12:46.5]

Noelle Murphy: Well we try and do it every couple of years. It's not necessarily that things change, but we want to keep checking the mood and kind of where...because we know sickness absence is a real priority for HR, it's not one of the exciting things, but it is one of the things that costs money every year. So we want to keep checking the mood.

Ellie Gelder: Absolutely. It is going to continue to be an issue for HR, isn't it? It's just how they can get line managers to own it. [0:13:18.1]

Noelle Murphy: Yes. Either that or sometimes these things go in cycles and it'll just go right back to HR, but it's hard to see that happening now, because organisations have so many more clearly defined policies in place etc. But it's certainly a perennial issue, no shadow of a doubt.

Ellie Gelder: Thanks very much for that Noelle, and you can read the full findings of the survey by going to our survey analysis tool and do look out for our upcoming survey on sickness absence rates for 2017, which will

be up on the site shortly. Well that brings us to the end of this week's XpertHR podcast. Thanks for listening. We're back again next Friday, but until then it's goodbye from us.