RISE IN PRESENTEEISM IS A WORRYING TREND

The average level of employee absence in the UK has fallen compared with last year according to a new survey, but it's not due to better health. *Back-up* looks at some disturbing underlying trends.

The 2012 *Absence management survey*, produced by human resources professionals the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and the Simplyhealth healthcare company shows a fall in absence levels from 7.7 days to 6.8 per employee a year.

The survey, published last month, also found that the fall in absence levels coincided with almost a third of employers reporting an increase in the number of people going into work ill, a trend which has become known as "presenteeism". A number of reasons are identified for this development.

The research shows that the threat of redundancy and concerns over job security are factors which contribute to presenteeism, with organisations that are expecting to make redundancies in the next six months more likely to report an increase in employees going into work when unwell, than employers that are not expecting to cut jobs.

The survey found that stress-related absence also appears to be on the increase, with two-fifths of employers reporting a rise over the past year and only one in ten reporting that the problem had decreased.

Last year's survey saw stress become the number one cause of workplace absence for the first time, and that trend has continued. And the level of reported mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression, among employees is also on the rise. More than twice the number of employers (44%) reported an increase in mental health problems in 2012 than did in 2009 (21%).

According to the survey, organisations that have noted an increase in presenteeism over the past year are more likely to report an increase in stress-related absence over the same period (52% compared with 38% of those who did not report an increase in people coming in to work ill). However, the survey shows that they are more likely to report an increase in mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression (62% compared with 35% of those who did not report an increase in people coming into work ill).

This is an unwelcome trend which has also been identified by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Its research found UK workers are the most depressed in Europe, with just over a quarter having been diagnosed with the condition.

A recent survey among 7,000 people in seven European countries conducted by MORI on behalf of the European Depression Association, found one in 10 employees have taken time off work at some point suffering from depression.

Those affected took an average of 36 days leave, although the figures ranged from 41 days in the UK to 23 in Italy. But across all of the countries surveyed, one in four of those suffering from depression chose not to tell their employer, with a third saying that they were worried it could put their job at risk.

The numbers suggest a serious problem. Yet nearly one in three employers reported no formal support or resources to deal with employees who suffer from depression, while 43% want better policies and legislation to protect employees.

Research by the mental health charity Mind, as part of its *Taking care of business* campaign, found that one in five workers said they risked being put first in line for redundancy if they disclosed their stress levels.

"We need to create open workplaces where mental health is discussed without discrimination, where we treat mental health with as much importance as physical health, and where we introduce policies that promote wellbeing, tackle the causes of work-related mental health problems and support staff who are experiencing mental health problems," said Mind chief executive Paul Farmer.

"Considering how common stress is, the taboos around discussing it simply aren't justified. In a modern workforce, paying attention to the mental wellbeing of employees, as well as their physical safety, should not be an afterthought but a matter of routine."

Mind argues that businesses that ignore wellbeing are losing out. "Employers who leave their workforce feeling unsupported are more likely to be affected by 'presenteeism', lower productivity and less

> **Survey found that stress-related absence also appears to be on the increase**

committed staff. Simple changes can improve staff wellbeing, such as making sure staff take a lunch break or get the chance to talk to managers. Equally, fostering an environment in which it's alright to talk about stress means that problems can be tackled before they start affecting your business," Farmer said.

The TUC has just produced *Trade unions and mental health: a resource list* which contains recommended publications from the trade union movement, advice specifically aimed at employers, and more general materials of use to individuals. It said: "Over recent years, there has been growing recognition of the extent of mental health issues in the workplace and outside.

Unions are aware that stigma based on ignorance and prejudice – from employers and from fellow workers – is probably the most significant barrier faced by people with mental health problems, and also the most difficult to challenge. "People with mental health issues continue to have one of the lowest employment rates of any group of disabled people," the TUC said.

It is encouraging unions to establish a link with national campaigns working on mental health, and in particular with MIND, which has an employment campaign and can be asked to deliver training or briefings.

TUC resource list can be downloaded at: www.tuc.org.uk/equality/tuc-21516-f0.cfm