

Some Sick Leave Policies can be Drain in Workplace

By Holly Culhane



As I walked into the entryway of a client's business, I could hear the wheezing and coughing occurring behind the "employee only" door. It is flu and cold season, and this company's workforce had been hit hard.

And while some U.S. health officials are saying this "moderately severe" season has peaked, my client doesn't share that optimism.

I offered him the usual tips: encourage employees to practice good hygiene, including frequently washing their hands; wash down countertops and equipment often; encourage people to cough into their sleeves, rather than spraying germs into the air; get flu shots; allow telecommuting when employees are sick; implement "wellness programs."

But clearly I was telling my client things he already knew. Most steps he had implemented.

One thing my client had not done – and which was likely contributing to his operational problems – was to provide sick leave benefits to his employees.

A recent survey by Challenger, Gray & Christmas, a Chicago consulting firm, revealed that about 40 percent of U.S. workers don't get paid if they are out sick. People who work for my client are among this 40 percent.

There are many reasons for not providing sick leave benefits. Often this occurs in industries with work forces that are comprised primarily of part-time employees. Providing sick leave benefits can be expensive. In these challenging economic times, businesses that are anxious to keep costs down usually limit sick leave pay to full-time employees.

But there are two sides to the sick leave coin. For every dollar saved, the question is: How much does it cost? An employee who drags into work with the flu or a bad cold can – and will – infect other employees. Productivity is reduced when employees merely "occupy a desk," rather than put in a full day's work, because they are sick. And customers don't want to receive a bag full of germs with their service. Surveys have estimated the nationwide cost to be between \$150 billion and \$250 billion a year.

The sick leave question divides into two categories: the haves and the have-nots.

Workers who have sick leave benefits may not use them for fear they will be called slackers if they call in sick. Some employees see themselves as indispensable and crawl into work even if they are sick. Others receive cash incentives if they do not use their sick leave, so they don't use it.

A company's well-considered and implemented sick leave policy can address "presenteeism," or showing up to work sick. Employers should encourage employees who are sick to utilize their sick leave and potentially send them home if they're ill. They should cross-train employees so they can temporarily

take over a colleague's duties. And employers who give cash bonuses to employees who do not use their sick leave should weigh the risks.

Encouraging a sick employee who does not have sick leave benefits to stay home is tough. Employers in this situation could consider creating an "emergency" sick leave benefit that can be implemented when the work force is hit by epidemic-like illnesses, or allow sick employees to work from home when it is practical.

Creating healthy work places requires both sound policies and common sense...and it's important employers use both!

This article written by Holly Culhane first appeared online and in The Bakersfield Californian on Tuesday, February 19, 2013. Holly Culhane is president of the Bakersfield-based human resources consulting firm P.A.S. Associates. She can be contacted through her website www.pasassociates.com and through the [PAS Facebook](#) page or by phone at 631-2165.

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