

THE ROLE OF BUSINESS IN THE SWINE FLU OUTBREAK

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With concerns over a global swine flu epidemic growing, it will be interesting to see the role that businesses take in dealing with and preventing the spread of the disease. Although there is no doubt that companies can help the situation, I am hoping that business leaders at least cease some of the common practices that encourage the spread of illness among employees.

It is not unusual for organizations to award some type of bonus to people who do not use their sick days over a defined period. The bonus may be in the form of a direct payout for not using sick days or indirectly combined with some other type of reward (e.g., a bonus which, to be eligible, requires perfect attendance during the period). However the payout is packaged, it is basically an incentive to discourage people from using (or abusing) sick days.

This type of incentive makes perfect sense when you do not trust some employees. Offering a bonus to those who do not abuse sick days seems logical because it rewards the *reliable* workers while punishing the *irresponsible* employees. What I have found with this type of incentive, however, is that it actually results in increasing – rather than decreasing - the number of sick days taken by employees; especially during cold and flu season.

Some companies distinguish between “excused” and “unexcused” absences by limiting incentives to only those who present a note from a doctor after calling in sick. Besides creating a patriarchal culture within the company where managers are believed to be more trustworthy than workers, this type of policy forces ill employees to take the time, energy and expense to see a doctor when all they may need is to rest for a day or two to recover sufficiently enough to return to work.

Rewarded for Spreading Colds & Flu

Rewarding people for perfect attendance encourages employees to come into work when they are sick and need to stay home and rest. This results in spreading the cold or flu to other employees, thereby increasing the number of people who either take sick days or come into work when they, like the person who first came into work when he or she was sick, should stay at home. In a small company, this can be devastating because a large percentage of the workforce can end up sick. In one large company, I saw infections spread quickly – even to facilities in other countries – because sick employees were encouraged to come into work instead of staying home to recover.

One can imagine the effect this type of behavior can have on a swine flu epidemic. Whether faced with a worldwide epidemic or the common cold, however, managers need to understand that encouraging sick people to come into work shows a lack of regard for the health of all employees and can result in large costs for the company.

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Why We Think It Works

Over the years, this type of incentive program has been very common among American companies for a variety of reasons.

1. Frustration

It is frustrating when someone calls in sick. We hire people because we need them to do a job and when they miss work without advance notice, it can cause problems with productivity, customer service, and scheduling, in addition to putting pressure on other employees.

An incentive to reduce absenteeism is an attempt to deal with the frustration that unfortunately can make the situation worse.

2. School Perfect Attendance Awards

Rewarding perfect attendance is a concept that many of us were first exposed to during our school days. It is very common for schools to award certificates to students who do not miss any days during the school year. As is done with companies, though, this type of incentive often results in sick students coming to school and spreading the sickness to other children – thereby increasing the total number of days missed by the student body (and teachers), as a whole.

3. Focus on Direct/Easy to Measure Costs

Determining the cost of absenteeism by measuring the number of sick days taken is easy, but unfortunately inaccurate. It is impossible to determine the costs associated with the lower productivity that results from employees coming into work sick. When multiplied by the number of employees who were infected by a person who came into work sick, the total drop in productivity can be staggering.

4. Hero Worship

Whether the result of a direct incentive or positive reinforcement, the American business culture tends to make a hero out of the employee who comes into work even when he or she is sick. We tend to look at anyone who is more committed to the company than their own health as a valued employee.

I once worked with a company where the CEO publicly praised managers in the corporate office for coming into work when they were ill. As a result, people became afraid to call in sick and only did so when they were physically unable to come into the office. During flu season, infections spread quickly through the office resulting in a number of problems for the company.

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5. Lack of Trust

Offering an incentive that discourages the use of sick days shows a lack of trust in employees because if you trust their motives, you would believe them when they called in sick. This can be a reflection of the company's hiring practices and its process for screening employees. If the company's values are clear and job candidates are carefully screened before hiring to assure they possess these values, you should be able to trust the motives of individuals.

Dealing with employees who appear to be abusing the company's attendance policy should be done immediately and on a case-by-case basis and not through companywide policy changes.

What Can Be Done?

There are a number of things that can be done to reduce absenteeism at a company. The most obvious is proactive health planning, which includes nutritional and health counseling to help employees strengthen their immune systems – especially during flu season. In addition to reducing employee sickness within the company, this type of initiative can improve productivity (by having healthier employees) and morale (by demonstrating that management cares about employees).

Another action that has been shown to help reduce absenteeism is to offer unlimited sick days to employees. When a specific number of sick days are offered, people think of them as something they are *owed* by the company and tend to believe they need to use them or lose them before the end of the year. An unlimited sick leave policy does not give the impression that people will *lose* days that they do not take.

As an example, a company I once worked with changed its sick leave policy from 10 days per year to unlimited days. Within the first year, the average number of sick days taken per employee was significantly reduced. [*As mentioned earlier, though, care must be taken in any measure used to evaluate the results from a change in sick leave policy*]

Focus on Health

Basically, the way to reduce absenteeism due to sickness – including a flu epidemic – is to focus on health instead of sickness. Attempting to improve the situation through artificial means like monetary incentives will not help people get sick less often. On the other hand, providing information, counseling, and a healthier work environment can give those who are willing to change the ability to do so, leading to sustained improvement.

Some of the steps businesses can take to help prevent an H1N1 epidemic (and reduce the financial impact if it does occur) are as follows:

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- Telecommuting: Encourage those employees who can work from home to do so. This obviously involves a certain level of trust that employees will, in fact, work when they are not in the office;
- Stress Management: Implement stress management and reduction programs for employees. Studies have shown that stress depresses the immune system and anything the company can do to help employees deal with stress can help to prevent (or reduce the effects of) the flu;
- Nutritional Counseling: Diet can help or hinder the effectiveness of a person's immune system. Counseling people on food choices and eating habits can help them strengthen their immune systems to fight off infections, as well as improve their overall health;
- Education: Educate people on the ways to prevent the spread of disease. Provide hand cleaners and anti-bacterial wipes in convenient locations throughout the workplace;
- Stay Home! Implement a policy for people to stay home when they are sick. Send people home when they are sick and come into work. Do not penalize people for using sick days and consider implementing an unlimited sick leave policy at least until the swine flu scare has passed. Also, eliminate monetary incentives that encourage people to come into work when they are sick.

Executives have the responsibility to take a role in preventing the spread of swine flu – not only for the health of their employees (and themselves), but also to help reduce the financial impact that a flu epidemic can have on an organization. Implementing the above actions, however, will not be easy for American companies because they require a fundamental change in the way managers think. The fear of an H1N1 global pandemic, however, may be just thing that stimulates this type of change in thinking.