

The Australian sickie

By Peter Wilson AM AHRI national president

A recent national survey conducted by a private health and wellbeing provider found that Australians are 30 per cent more likely to take a sick leave day than their counterparts in Britain. We can't put this one down to the Brits feeling more positive about the Royal family or their performances in the Olympic sports arena. There is something else at play here, and oftentimes it's the motive of the person on sick leave.

Australians take an average of nearly nine sick leave days a year and it's averaged just under a fortnight per annum for many years, compared with just under seven days in Britain. The survey also shows if you work in a telco, a utility, call centre, tourism operator or outsourced provider, the sick-leave utilisation jumps to between 10 and 13 days a year on average.

While physical or mental illnesses are randomly distributed in their weekly occurrence, the act of taking sick leave does not distribute evenly through the working week. A few years ago a senior HR director forum involving this writer checked their organisations' sick-leave records and found the following set of facts.

The lowest probability for occurrence of a sick leave day is Wednesday. The probability that a sick leave day will be registered on a Monday was three times that of a Wednesday, and Fridays came in at two and a half times the more modest midweek levels. Then came Tuesday and Thursday, with sick-leave probability more than one and half times that of a Wednesday.

With working weeks that include a public holiday (on other than a Wednesday) the above probabilities go up again for 'sandwich sickies' - those days caught between a weekend and a public holiday.

Furthermore, the incidence of sick leave is higher in those industries where there are quota requirements on outputs, and the workplace tasks are repetitive, menial or stressful. The incidence of sick leave is also higher in workplaces where the local leadership culture is a 'command and control - micro-management' style. In poor culture workplaces, presenteeism compounds these factors. People who are genuinely sick come into work and spread their viruses, in part to protect their sick-leave credits for a rainy day.

It is interesting that until recently one call-centre business, Salesforce, bucked the industry stereotype and was Hewitt employer of the year for about five years in a row. Any visitor to Salesforce would have seen workstations decorated like a teenager's bedroom, with the occupants happily ploughing through their demanding daily quotas. This seems to suggest that a concerted effort towards workforce engagement can have an effect on the incidence of sick leave, whatever the industry.

Genuine sick leave usually reflects, say, a week for the annual bout of influenza, plus another day for an unrelated ailment. That's six days a year, not nine. My thesis from all this data is that Australia bears about three unwarranted sick leave days a year, for our 11 million workers. That number works out at 33 million working days lost, which at average earnings of \$66,000 per annum, results in a total cost to the economy of around \$10 billion annually.

Addressing the sickie malaise is a case of 'eliminate the negative, and accentuate the positive' as the song goes.

Positive strategies should involve targeting workplace cultures and leadership styles. The more inspired work colleagues are and the greater respect accorded to them, the higher will be their attendance and productivity rates. Chase out the command-and-control leaders to a corporate Jurassic Park where they feel more comfortable and relevant.

Negative strategies can also be effective. The scheduling of routine return-to-work meetings with employees returning from bouts of sick leave is a useful technique. It's also worth requiring medical

certificates for absences of more than half a day, rather than two consecutive days absence as many workplaces still do. If privacy settings allow, employers can easily follow any absent workers on Facebook or read what they are tweeting, which is a legitimate and potentially instructive practice. Come down firmly on proven malingerers, and send coughing and spluttering 'presentee' workers home – they're a danger to themselves and others.

Another strategy is to reduce sick-leave entitlements to 10 days a year on average or fewer, with perhaps up to 30 days extendable leave for those experiencing an authenticated severe or life-threatening illness. These are policy guidelines that match typical sickness incidence and will protect almost all people, most of the time.

There was a recent case of a worker who took a sick day to organise a barbecue on Facebook. Unfortunately for him, his then-boss was a Facebook friend. Now that boss is neither a boss nor a friend, and the industrial court turned down the worker's appeal for reinstatement. Don't let a minority of your colleagues barbecue your sick-leave policy. That might mean a few who play with this fire may get burned. When that happens, others will not miss the message.

Source: HRmonthly, November 2012, pp. 4