

# Employee attitudes that predict absenteeism



Steve Walton MAPS  
Organisational Psychologist  
Fenchurch

**Assessing candidates for their teamwork and customer service orientation serves more than a single purpose. Stephen Walton, principal psychologist with Fenchurch Corporate Psychology, alerts recruiters to employee attitudes that lead to higher rates of absenteeism.**

Examination of the data from a survey of 850 employees in various industries across Australia isolated a number of attitudes that were associated with greater rates of sick leave usage over a 12 months period. It is proposed that if an employer can recognise the attitudes that lead to greater absence at short-notice through the misuse of sick leave, then it should be possible to reduce the risk of absenteeism by selecting out during recruitment those candidates who hold such beliefs.

Regression analysis of a large number of attitudes revealed that nine in particular were the most likely to predict both the percentage of annual sick leave entitlement used and the proportion of that sick leave used for purposes other than personal illness (i.e. "sickies"). The order of statements in Table 1 commences with the most influential attitude at the top of the list followed by attitudes which, while successively less influential, nevertheless contribute to a set of beliefs that define employees with distinct absenteeism behaviour.

## **Employee Attitudes**

It is a common feature of recruitment that employers will focus on a candidate's attitudes towards customer service and teamwork. These attributes are naturally of interest because of the direct link that exists between an organisation's achievements and employee attitudes that support a positive customer experience or contribute to the effectiveness and productivity of a team. It is therefore worth highlighting that Statements 2 and 9 in Table 1 provide a further justification for exploring such attitudes since employees who have less regard for their customers and co-workers are more likely to use and abuse their sick leave privileges.

Statements 1 and 5 in Table 1 show that employees who value time away from work more than the pay they might lose as a consequence of their absence will always use a higher proportion of their sick leave entitlement plus, a greater proportion of the sick leave that they take will be used for purposes other than personal illness. This type of attitude will always be difficult for employers to manage. Some literature on the topic suggests that employers can reduce this type of absenteeism if they are prepared to deliver rewards that exceed the value that an employee places on time away from work. While no doubt true in an abstract sense, the reality of operating a rational remuneration and reward system makes it difficult to respond to each individual's perception of the value of their time. In large workforces, reward systems are utilitarian by necessity, achieving the best outcome from the greatest number of workers. It is doubtful, therefore, that an attitude that emphasises the individual value of time away from work can be accommodated within most employers' remuneration practices, which means that selecting out candidates with this type of attitude at the recruitment stage would seem to be essential.

The attitude exposed by Statement 3 in Table 1 is unusual because it is more likely to reflect a sentiment that develops in response to an employee's experience of absenteeism in their workplace. The results suggest that the existence of an absenteeism culture may act to either excuse employees' absenteeism behaviour or place a "norming" pressure on employees to fit in with what they see occurring around them. While what is virtually a cultural contagion is not easily addressed at the recruitment stage, the increase in absenteeism because of such an attitude confirms the necessity for employers to intervene to change an unsuitable workplace culture.

## Employee attitudes that predict absenteeism

Employees are inclined to take more sick leave if, as shown in Statement 7, there is a high degree of commonality amongst jobs. It appears that some employees will be more disposed towards taking sick leave if they feel that their co-workers are able to compensate for their absence. While not contributing significantly to the prediction of sick leave usage, similar patterns of absenteeism were seen amongst respondents who *disagreed* with the following statements that were also contained in the attitude survey:

- I am concerned about the effect I could have on the organisation's reputation if I am absent at short notice.
- I am concerned about the effect I could have on productivity and the quality of work if I am absent at short notice.

**TABLE 1: Average proportion of annual sick leave entitlement used and (in brackets) the average proportion of that sick leave used for other purposes (i.e. "sickies").**

Statement	Strongly Agree	Tend to Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Tend to Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Taking time off work at short notice is often more important to me than being paid for the absence.	127.8* (37.0%)	83.9% (33.4%)	62.6% (22.6%)	64.7% (17.6%)	48.7% (13.8%)
2. I am concerned about the inconvenience I could cause my customers if I am absent at short notice	51.35% (14.3%)	69.5% (23.1%)	77.2% (27.2%)	82.4% (25.4%)	119.2%* (45.5%)
3. There is a lot of absence at short notice in my workplace	85.2% (24.4%)	74.9% (28.7%)	70.2% (21.4%)	52.8% (16.5%)	40.1% (11.9%)
4. I make a point of using all of the paid leave that I am entitled to.	82.0% (33.7%)	86.5% (35.3%)	92.0% (26.4%)	65.3% (21.5%)	52.6% (16.4%)
5. I will only take time off work at short notice if I have paid leave to use	46.6% (15.1%)	59.1% (19.3%)	61.4% (19.7%)	85.1% (28.9%)	72.5% (23.6%)
6. I feel secure in my job	61.8% (18.9%)	65.3% (23.9%)	81.4% (21.9%)	97.9% (26.7%)	109.7%* (46.1%)
7. I know that my co-workers can do my job if I am absent at short notice.	86.3% (22.9%)	78.2% (30.5%)	62.2% (18.3%)	57.5% (18.1%)	54.0% (16.2%)
8. I feel an obligation to my employer to use my leave entitlements as they are meant to be used	53.0% (16.1%)	76.4% (27.3%)	84.7% (28.0%)	85.5% (22.3%)	72.0% (25.8%)
9. I am concerned about the inconvenience I could cause my team if I am absent at short notice	63.6% (20.0%)	78.0% (25.2%)	75.0% (24.2%)	79.1% (42.6%)	73.3% (23.8%)

\* Sick leave usage in excess of 100% indicates that the full annual sick leave entitlement has been used plus either paid sick leave credits accrued from previous years or, more often, unpaid sick leave.

Statements 4 and 8 reflect the sense of entitlement that some employees bring to a job. Obviously, employees who maintain the view that is acceptable to use leave in a way that is inconsistent the conditions for the grant of such leave will use a greater proportion of their sick leave entitlement. Interestingly, it is also the case that employees having no strong view one way or the other also tend to use a high proportion of their sick leave entitlement and a significant proportion of that leave for purposes other than illness. This finding suggests that ambivalent attitudes may also be undesirable in terms of managing absenteeism. Recruiting employees with a demonstrable record of using leave correctly or with clearly held views about the correct use of leave will deliver a better result than giving the benefit of the doubt to candidates with no firm view on the matter.

## ***Employee attitudes that predict absenteeism***

Although not contributing significantly to the prediction of sick leave usage, similar patterns of absenteeism were seen amongst survey respondents who *agreed* with the following statements:

- I use my leave entitlements as it suits me, not necessarily according to the rules.
- I feel that it is quite OK to take time off at short notice rather than put off things outside of work.

In Statement 6 we tested the view that employees might be more likely to “fall into line” with regard to absenteeism if sanctions, such as losing their job, were an obvious threat. We found that this was not the case and instead observed that employees feeling less secure about their circumstances were inclined to use a greater proportion of their sick leave entitlement and to use more of that sick leave for other purposes. Around 28% of survey respondents felt either insecure or ambivalent about the security of their job. It is perhaps instructive that fostering a sense of security amongst employees will have a more positive impact on absenteeism than the alternative.

### **Recruiting the right employee**

Based on these findings it is possible to identify a set of attitudes that lead to greater absence through the misuse of sick leave, although determining these things with some precision and reliability might be best achieved through the use of standardised psychological assessment tools as well as recruitment interviews.

Fenchurch psychologists are able to provide advice regarding candidate attitudes if absenteeism is a particular concern in your workplace.

### **Contact us**

What assessment or talent management project can we assist you with today? Our assessment specialists are ready to learn more about your particular needs so that we can provide the right solution for you.

Call us now on **1300 799 894** or contact us at [www.fenchurch.com.au](http://www.fenchurch.com.au)

We look forward to hearing from you.