sick of "sickies"?

JOHN HACKETT DIRECTOR, EVENT RECRUITMENT

PICTURE THIS: it's Monday morning, it's cold and wet outside and you have a headache from all the wine you drank at the barbeque yesterday.

Or perhaps you feel exhausted after staying back at work yesterday to meet that crucial deadline and today you could really do with a much-needed sleep-in and a relaxing day catching up on some important "me-time".

So, you call up your employer and say you have a stomach bug or that you have been sick in bed all weekend with the flu. Another "sickie" and a paid day off work - sound familiar?

Sick leave is defined as paid leave given by an employer to an employee when they are unable to attend work due to illness or incapacity. But there has been discussion over recent years about the so called "sickie epidemic", where employees are increasingly misusing their sick leave entitlements. There are a number of surveys that have revealed an increasing number of Australian employees are taking days off when they are not actually sick.

Newspoll Research (CareerOne, 2005) showed that while 70 per cent of respondents claimed to spend the day sick in bed, 30 per cent said they had used their sick leave to relax with family, catch up on housework or go shopping. Similarly, research undertaken in 2006 by Hallis, a human resource industry consultancy, found that 56 per cent of respondents had taken sick leave in the past for reasons other than illness, an increase of 13 per cent since the last survey had been carried out three years prior.

Other literature states that sick leave tends to increase during school holidays and immediately after pay day. It also appears that attitudes towards sick leave are changing and are increasingly seen as a way of balancing life demands. Of course, the trouble is that when an employee takes an unnecessary day off work, their colleagues and employer bear the brunt of the extra workload they leave behind.

A report entitled "Absenteeism" by James Anthony highlighted a study by the University of Western Australia which found that around 270,000 Australian employees are absent from work on any given day, and the Hallis research estimated that the loss of productivity to the economy due to absenteeism in 2006 was estimated at $18 billion.

With such high costs and adverse effects on work productivity for employers, it begs the question – what can employers do to minimise employee absenteeism?

There are a number of theories to explain why employees are taking so many "sickies". Poor supervision and management styles and low morale in the workplace can lead to increased absenteeism from employees who find their work environment stressful. Similarly, unrealistic workloads and deadlines and a lack of job security are also seen to have a similar impact. In fact, the Hallis research highlighted that those employees who felt secure in their jobs used an average of six days sick leave per year but this increased to 10.3 days for those who felt less secure.

To reduce absenteeism, employers and managers need to focus on creating a positive workplace where they take the time to listen to employees, treat them fairly and with respect and provide realistic timeframes and the necessary support to complete their workload. Employers and managers should be in tune with their employees' needs and be aware of any evidence of employee stress in the workplace.

Employers should also keep abreast of market salaries so their employees are remunerated competitively and that performance and salary reviews occur as planned. When employees feel they are under-paid for the work they do or feel neglected because that promised performance and salary review has been postponed or overlooked they can sometimes compensate for this by taking more sick leave. Employers need to ensure that salaries are based on industry standards and have fair procedures set in place to determine wage levels and the opportunity for career progression.

Employees who feel that they are not getting enough "time out" for their family responsibilities, household demands and social life are also more likely to take a "sickie" in order to redress the balance. Thankfully, there are a growing number of employers who support a work/life balance and if it is feasible a flexible work environment that allows employees to carry out some of their work duties from home or variable start and finish times can have a positive impact on staff absenteeism.

Some employees do take "sickies" simply because they feel they are entitled to their annual sick leave. By providing rewards or bonuses for employees who show high levels of attendance at work or even allowing them to "cash in" their sick leave that has accrued at the end of the year, employers can help bring about attitudinal change to sick leave amongst their employees. The "sickie" phenomenon is never going to go away entirely but those employers who show an obligation to their employees and provide a satisfying work environment are more likely to reduce absenteeism.