

EDITORIAL

Presenteeism during the COVID-19 pandemic: risks and solutions

The COVID-19 pandemic means that many organizations are under considerable pressure to remain productive and profitable. Although reducing the cost of sickness absence may seem a priority, there is growing evidence that sickness presenteeism (continuing to work when unwell) is far more costly than absenteeism [1,2]. It is therefore crucial to highlight the wide-ranging costs of presenteeism for individuals and organization, the factors that encourage it, and the additional risks posed by the pandemic. How organizations can reduce the incidence and damage caused by presenteeism should also be considered.

To some extent, sickness presenteeism can be beneficial, as work provides structure, builds self-esteem and offers opportunities for social engagement and support. Presenteeism can also be therapeutic, as a managed approach can help employees return to work gradually following sickness absence. Nonetheless, there is extensive evidence that working while unwell can delay rather than expedite recovery and increase the risk of future health problems and sickness absence [3,4]. Studies have also found that presenteeism can impair productivity and result in errors, accidents and injuries to the employee, their co-workers and the public [2,5]. Moreover, the findings that people frequently continue to work while experiencing infectious diseases [6] raise particularly serious concerns for public health during the current pandemic.

A wide range of personal, organizational and occupational factors have been found to influence people's decisions about whether they should continue to work or take time off sick. The COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to exacerbate many of the known risk factors and present some additional challenges. Financial insecurity is a common reason for presenteeism, particularly so for employees who have limited entitlement to sick pay, whose work is insecure or where there are few options for re-employment [7]. Job insecurity is increasing rapidly in an uncertain job market where unemployment rates are expected to substantially rise. Such conditions can also encourage employees to work during illness to show their value, loyalty and commitment to their organization and avoid job loss. People with a poor sick record due to chronic health problems might be particularly likely to work while sick during the pandemic, especially as some organizations are using sickness absence records to select staff for redundancy.

People often engage in presenteeism as they are reluctant to 'let down' managers and burden colleagues, especially where staffing levels are low, or organizations are struggling to survive [2]. Employees may also continue to work during illness, or return to work too soon, as they believe that their managers and colleagues do not consider them sufficiently unwell to take time off sick. This may be the case for those who have contracted a fairly 'mild' case of COVID-19, as some people are continuing to have difficulties with daily activities and experiencing symptoms such as chronic fatigue, weakness and cognitive difficulties several months later [8].

Reviews have identified several organizational factors that promote presenteeism [1,2]. It can be endemic in workplace cultures that stigmatize sick leave and 'normalize' long working hours. Presenteeism is also more likely in jobs with high workload pressure, which has increased in many organizations during the pandemic. The short staffing experienced in some organizations will inevitably increase workloads and working hours, which can be compounded by the need to cover for sick or vulnerable colleagues. Greater flexibility is also required during the pandemic, as staff may need to learn new skills rapidly and extend their availability to make the organization more competitive. All of these factors will increase the risk of presenteeism among workers, as well as generating feelings of pressure and stress that can increase the likelihood of future health problems.

In March 2020, steps taken to reduce the risk of transmission of the COVID-19 virus meant that people who could work from home should do so. This has involved a major shift in working practices for individuals and organizations; while some have found it a positive experience, others have found it difficult to accommodate to their new environment and working patterns. Research indicates that some homeworkers are struggling to combine paid work with caring responsibilities in less than optimum conditions and there is evidence that their working hours and stress levels have generally increased [9,10]. Under such circumstances, the pressure to remain working during illness can be intensified. Disconnecting from work can also be harder if there are no physical boundaries between the work and personal domains. Presenteeism is also less visible when staff are

working at home, as managers may be less able to identify health problems among their staff.

As sickness presenteeism is particularly prevalent among the so-called ‘helping’ professions [2]. Such jobs have many of the organizational risk factors highlighted above such as high workload pressure, long hours and short staffing. Moreover, helping professionals typically have a strong sense of duty and responsibility for the welfare of others, which can intensify the pressure to attend work, especially during a public health emergency. The risk of COVID-19 in health and social care is higher, meaning that cover for colleagues who are absent, or shielding will be required. Presenteeism is also common in the ‘gig’ economy where work is frequently low paid without sickness benefits. It is anticipated that the number of gig workers will increase considerably in the future, which gives further cause for concern.

The scale and potential costs of presenteeism means that preventative action is needed. Employers are advised to take a long-term view that balances concern about the immediate costs of sickness absence with a recognition of how sickness presenteeism can undermine the future health and functioning of employees during the pandemic and beyond. Firstly, it is crucial to assess the risk of presenteeism and the factors that underlie it, possibly by adapting an existing framework such as the UK Management Standards approach. The findings can inform interventions to address the organizational causes of presenteeism at source. Organizations should also review sickness management policies to ensure that, wherever possible, staff who take sick leave for legitimate reasons are not penalized.

Occupational health practitioners are experiencing increased demand for their services since the pandemic. It is vital to ensure that they are adequately resourced and any barriers to accessing the service identified and addressed. Forging closer working relationships between managers and occupational health will also enhance mutual understanding of the risk factors and help generate more effective ways to manage sickness absence and rehabilitation during the pandemic. A more flexible use of Med 3 ‘fit-notes’ may be helpful where employees may be able to do some work at home if, for example, they are self-isolating, waiting for test results or recovering from minor illness.

Organizations and employees should work together to establish cultural norms that encourage people to take enough time off sick to recover. It is possible that sickness presenteeism may become less acceptable, both socially and by organizations, due to fears of COVID-19 transmission and the need to take pre-emptive action for the collective good. Investing in training for supervisors and managers to help them support their staff and identify and address the early signs of stress will also be useful, possibly using the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Manager Competencies framework. Managers may also benefit from training in coaching techniques to facilitate critical well-being conversations with staff, whether working from home or externally.

As many employees are working at home for the foreseeable future, providing guidance on how to do so in a healthy and sustainable way is urgently required, with particular focus on boundary-setting and withdrawing from work communications when off sick. Introducing more creative approaches to flexible working is also likely to be helpful, to enable staff to have more choice and control over their working patterns. People who can ‘self-schedule’ their working hours tend to report lower levels of presenteeism, and this can also help accommodate the limitations of people with long-term conditions.

Managing presenteeism effectively is a long-term investment in the well-being of people and organizations. It is particularly important during the pandemic to ensure that employees remain healthy and can perform at their best.

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