

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/business/chi-0411150023nov15,1,2099148.story>

TRENDS: WORKPLACE HEALTH

Coming to work sick leaves firms feeling ill

Studies suggest productivity loss far greater than staying at home

By Barbara Rose
Tribune staff reporter

Advertisement

November 15, 2004

When a virus infected more than 1,200 guests and employees at the Flamingo Las Vegas Hotel last month, managers offered a powerful incentive for sick workers to stay home: six days off with pay.

The measure was part of the hotel's efforts to quell an outbreak of norovirus, a highly contagious disease that causes vomiting and diarrhea. Health officials praised the hotel's response.

"What they're doing is great," said Jennifer Sizemore, spokeswoman for the Clark County Health District in Las Vegas. "That is what we would like to see more people doing, paying people to stay home."

Yet, except in cases of a public health threat, employers send mixed signals about staying home from work in a society in which many embrace Woody Allen's observation that "80 percent of success is showing up."

The trend among employers is to eliminate distinctions between sick leave and other types of paid absence, forcing workers to choose between burrowing under the covers with a cold or toughing it out at work in order to preserve time off for a family emergency or vacation.

The start of flu season also coincides with crunch time at many companies, when businesses are closing out books at the end of the calendar year and stretching to meet annual sales goals.

Employees feel increasing pressure to produce in a competitive economy, as many companies are cutting costs and asking workers to do more with less. And it's no secret that employers hold the upper hand in a tight labor market.

"You feel a pressure to be there and be seen," said Roslyn Stone, chief operating officer of Corporate Wellness Inc. in Mt. Kisco, N.Y., which arranges medical services for midsize companies. "It's a very real pressure."

Studies suggest that productivity losses from working while sick--a phenomenon known as "presenteeism"--far outstrip the costs of absenteeism, especially in cases of chronic ailments, such as headaches, allergies or depression.

"There's a much greater impact than we thought," said Dr. William Bunn, vice president for health safety, security and productivity at Navistar International Corp.'s International Truck and Engine Corp.

"Our approach is, we try to do things to help people keep well," he said.

Keeping employees healthy during the flu season will be harder this year because of the flu-vaccine shortage. Sixty percent of employers polled by the Virginia-based Society for Human Resource Management had planned to offer flu shots, but most inoculation programs were canceled because of the shortage.

Shots are considered good prevention. An employee who gets a flu shot has 43 percent fewer sick days and 44 percent fewer doctor visits, according to a 2000 study in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

"Productivity is going to be affected," said Dr. Richard Chaifetz, chairman and chief executive of Chicago-based ComPsych Corp., which advises businesses on employee assistance programs.

Harvard University economist David Cutler estimates the flu's costs to the economy could run as high as \$20 billion, including \$12 billion for missed work.

Yet, an equally pressing concern is employees who come to work while sick and spread the virus. Flu sufferers are contagious for up to seven days after symptoms occur, Chaifetz said.

"Telling people at the busy end of the year to stay home is counterintuitive, but that's the message we have to deliver," said Stone, who chairs a workplace flu-prevention working group sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "The message that needs to be encouraged from the top down is, 'Don't come back to work before you are fully recovered. Please don't come to work when you're sick.'"

That's not an easy message to heed.

For starters, employees get fewer paid sick days than in the past. Jon VanCleve, time-off and work/life consultant at Hewitt Associates Inc. in Lincolnshire, estimates the average number of paid sick days for full-time U.S. workers is about five per year, down from six in 2001.

Heavy workloads are the most common reason why employees work when they're unhealthy.

"People are being real choosy about the days they really are sick," VanCleve said. "If they have a cold, they might come in and save that sick day for when they're really down and out, because they know how hard it is to catch up."

A survey by ComPsych confirms his observation.

Thirty-three percent of employees surveyed last winter said they worked while sick because their workload made it too difficult to take time off. Twenty-six percent said it felt too "risky" to take time off. An additional 18 percent said they saved their sick days for when "my kids need me."

Only 23 percent said they put their health first, according to ComPsych.

"Taking a day off is just very difficult, whether it's because you're sick or taking a vacation day," said Leslie Beyer, a spokeswoman at Zebra Technologies Corp. in Vernon Hills.

Still, she said, "It's not very comfortable when my head feels like it weighs 1,000 pounds."

Copyright © 2004, *Chicago Tribune*