



MANAGING SICKNESS ABSENCE IN HYBRID AND REMOTE WORKPLACES

Everything HR needs to know



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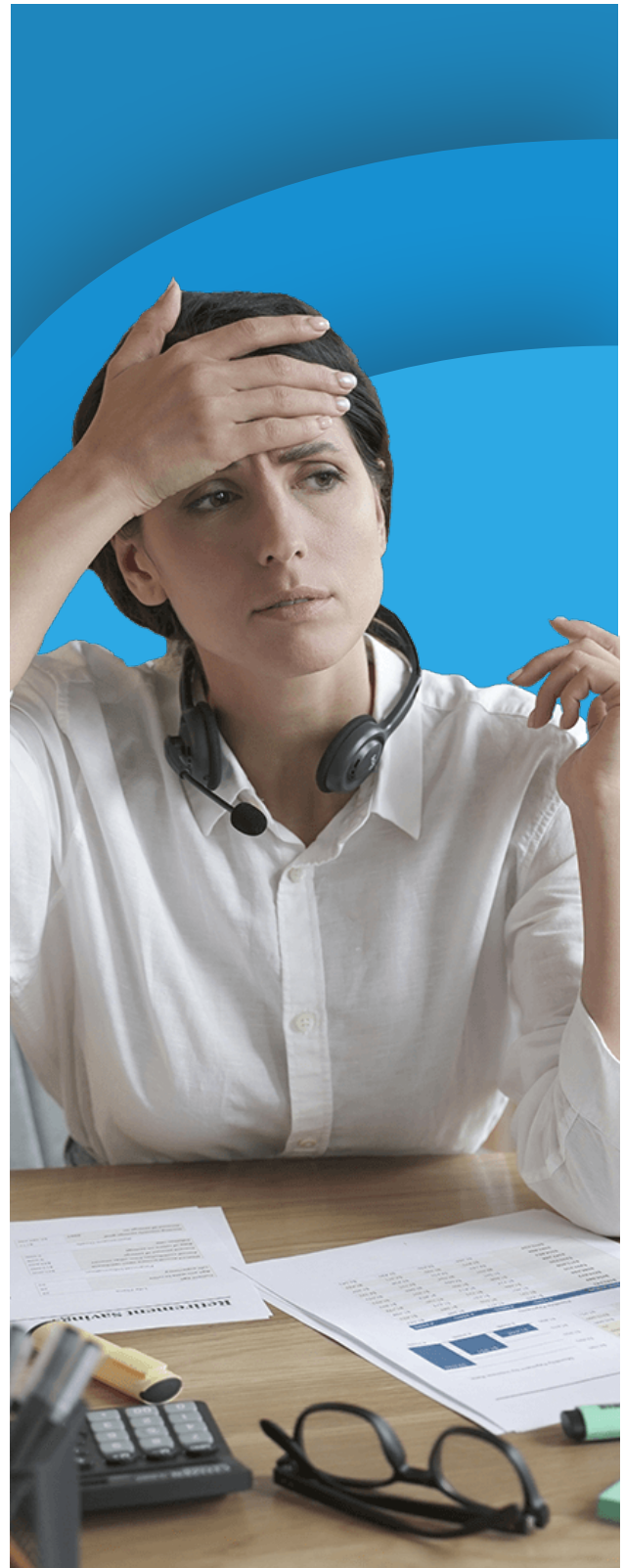
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FOREWORD

With finances squeezed and labour markets becoming tighter, organisations will be looking to operate as efficiently as possible

However, this looks to be an increasingly difficult task as sickness absence rates have been rising rapidly since 2021: with recent data from the [ONS*](#) showing they have been at their highest in over a decade, with nearly 150 million working days lost to illness or injury. Interestingly though, only one in four absences were attributed to Covid-19.

Although businesses can't control if and when their staff become ill, HR professionals need to implement effective strategies to help their organisation cope with rising levels of sick leave. The findings in this report will help them do exactly that.



ARE HYBRID AND REMOTE WORKING AFFECTING ABSENCE?

The surge in hybrid and remote working since the Covid-19 pandemic has delivered benefits for employers and employees alike, with [research from the CIPD](#) finding that new ways of working have increased productivity and efficiency, and could potentially increase wellbeing and engagement if staff are given a say over when and where they work.

Personnel Today and Cezanne HR surveyed 249 UK HR professionals about their post-Covid working practices. On average, 56% of respondents' workforces are based at home or split their week between home and the office. For 35% of organisations, 90% of their workforce is hybrid or based remotely.

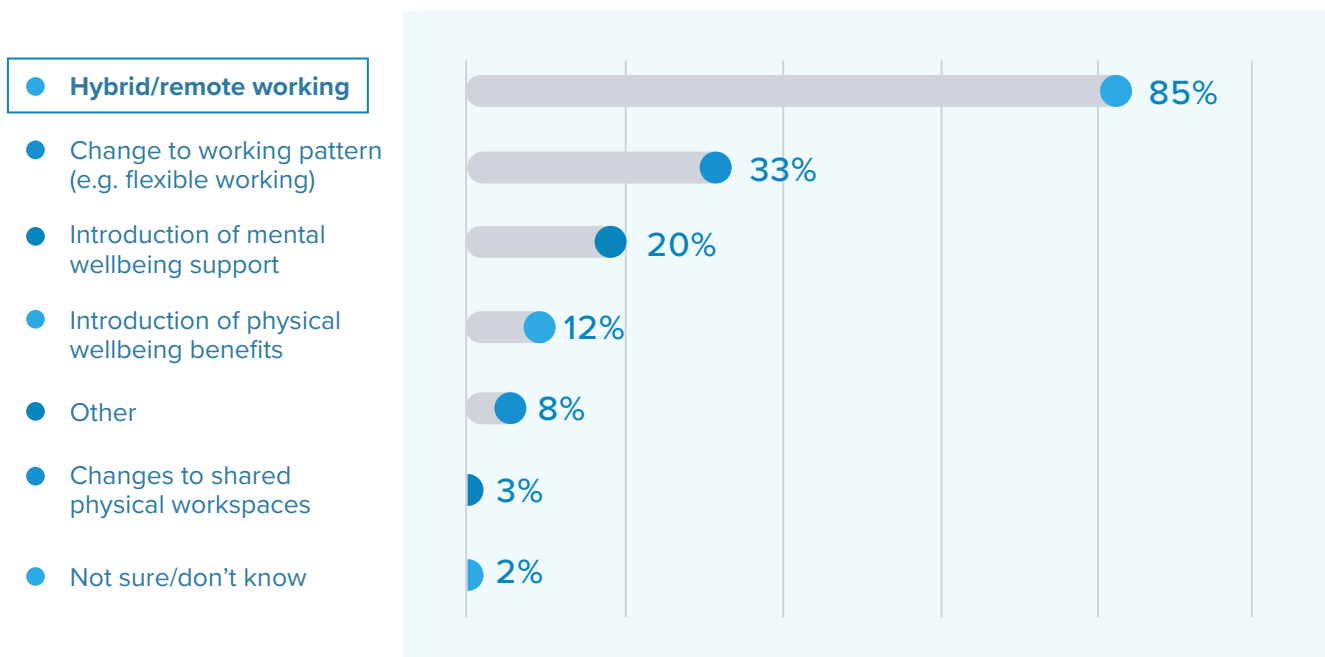
Almost half (45%) of HR professionals say the number of days lost to short-term, unplanned absences

in their organisation have dropped since the end of Covid-19 restrictions. Eighty-five per cent of these organisations directly attributed this to hybrid/remote working.

Taken at face value, this reduction in absence can be seen as positive. However, this could also suggest that remote/hybrid working has allowed employees to continue to work in some capacity while they are unwell, or that absence is going unreported as employers have no visibility of when employees are sick.

One in six (16%) of respondents say short-term absence has risen. The main reasons for this include short-term physical illnesses such as colds and bugs (93% of respondents) and poor mental health (59%).

What do you think are the main reasons for the drop in short-term, unplanned absences?

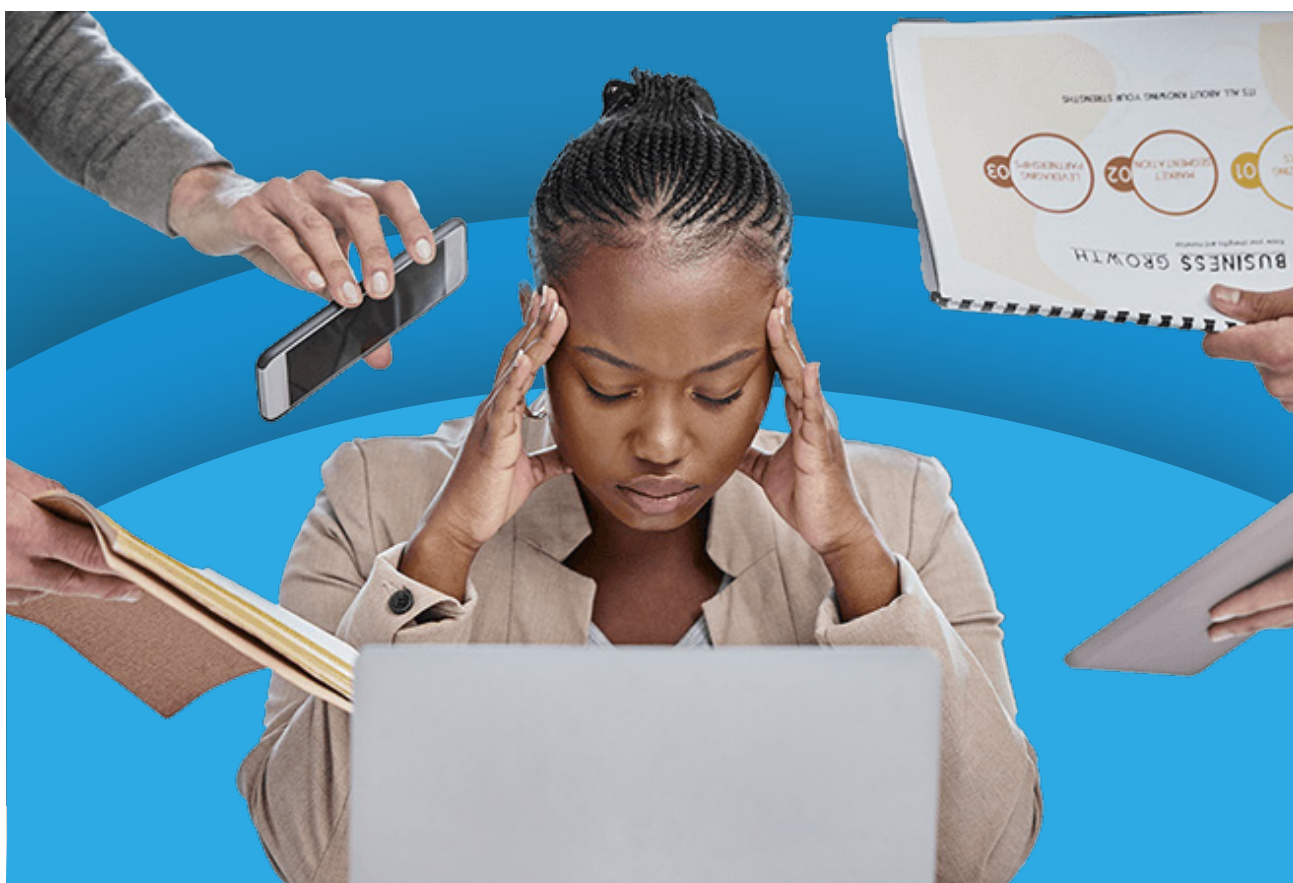


SHORT-TERM ABSENCE PUTS PRESSURE ON COLLEAGUES

Increased stress for colleagues is seen as the biggest business impact of short-term, unplanned absences, cited by 63% of HR professionals. This is particularly prevalent in the third sector, where 80% of respondents say stress on others is a major side-effect of unplanned absence.

When it comes to managing short-term absences, **55% say line managers are not enforcing absence procedures**, rising to 68% in larger organisations, and 17% say employees are not recording absences.

Nearly a third find it more challenging to manage short-term absences with hybrid or remote staff, rising to 40% in organisations with 250 or more employees. Asked about the main issues they encounter, 79% have no visibility into when staff are sick and 64% say problems stem from a lack of face-to-face contact between employees and their line manager.



FEW EMPLOYERS HAVE ABSENCE POLICIES THAT REFLECT HYBRID WORKING

Despite hybrid/remote working being commonplace, only 30% say their absence policies reflect new working practices, with 26% working to update them.

Only 71% of organisations make their short-term absence policies available on a shared workspace or HR portal that employees can access easily from any device. 31% store them on a shared drive that can only be accessed via company IT systems.

Making absence policies and procedures clear, transparent and consistent for all employees was ranked the most effective way of reducing unplanned absences, by 35% of respondents. More than two-thirds (67%) placed it in their top three methods for reducing absence.

The key to an effective absence policy is making it 'at a glance' clear. It should be simple to understand to everyone: so that means no 40-page documents with endless clauses, exclusions or appendices. The more complex your absence policy is, the greater the chance employees simply won't read it, or fully understand it.

In addition, it should ideally be easily accessible for all your employees, and located somewhere everyone can gain access: such as an HR portal or shared workspace.

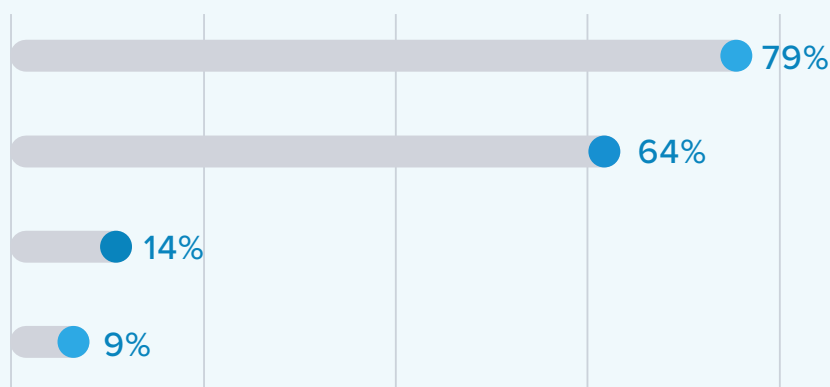
What do you consider to be the main challenges when it comes to managing absence among hybrid/remote staff?

● **No visibility into when staff are sick**

● Lack of face-to-face contact with line manager

● Disjointed or manual procedures

● Other



No good absence policy should be without:

- **What to do when employees are too ill to work** – including who to contact, when and how they should do it
- **Details on sick pay** - how much employees will receive, and for how long
- **How the company supports employees who are unwell** – information on how often the organisation will check in with them, and links to any company healthcare benefits or support
- **Guidance on other types of leave** – this could include compassionate leave, sabbaticals, or so-called ‘duvet days’. Include clear explanations of what each type is and when it should be used. With parental leave, consider having this as a separate document
- **Annual leave** – clearly state what the standard annual leave allowance is, when it should be used, and how much can be carried across into the next year.

HALF DON'T TRACK SHORT-TERM ABSENCES

Only 42% of HR professionals say they have KPIs or other business metrics they use to actively track absences lasting 1-2 days. 52% admit to having none at all, despite this being important for identifying trends and business impacts arising from unplanned absence.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, organisations with 250+ employees (50%) were more likely to say they track absence using KPIs than SMEs (34%).

Unplanned short-term absences can be costly. Of course, short-term absences are often genuine, and it's much better that staff rest and recuperate rather than struggling into work – either physically or virtually.

However, it can be easy for a culture to develop where it's considered acceptable to throw a 'sickie' to nurse a hangover or avoid a tedious commute. Indeed, 87% of respondents believe employees take sickies either regularly, infrequently or rarely.

If you can track absences with an absence manage-

ment software, and map them against different areas of the business, you'll have the metrics you need to identify where problems may be arising.

It's also useful to know how many days of holiday entitlement employees have at any time. This helps with both resourcing and financial reporting.

CASE STUDY



Law firm BPE Solicitors uses the Cezanne HR Absence Management module to track staff absences.

BPE Solicitors' Bethany Hamilton says: "The Cezanne HR system has helped make it so much easier for us to capture staff absences and when they're happening - we're getting a much better 'real time' look. We're now able to answer important questions, like 'who's off?', 'Why are they off?', 'Is there a trend?'. Also, it's now much easier to manage staff sicknesses: especially when you get automatic email notifications through alerting us that, for example, someone has exceeded their sickness allowances.

"It's not just the sickness absence management it's helped with, though. The ability to go onto Cezanne HR and look at who's had holiday or how much holiday has been taken across the entire organisation really useful.

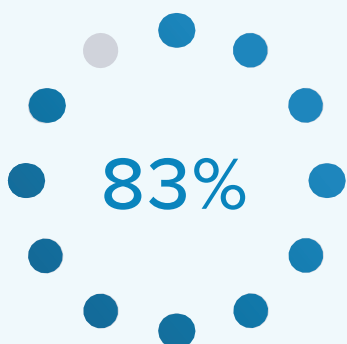
"We can now better forecast when people will take time off and plan workloads accordingly. It's really gives us complete control of absences and provides the data to back-up our decision making."

HOW TO REDUCE UNPLANNED ABSENCES

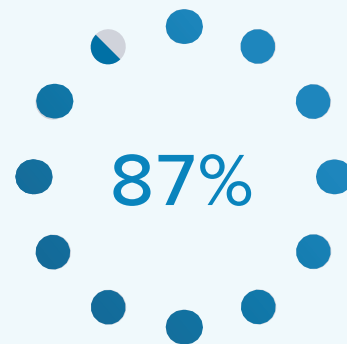
Having regular formal and informal check-ins is regarded as the most effective action managers can take to reduce unplanned absences among hybrid and remote workers, with 45% ranking this top. Encouraging regular breaks throughout the day and regularly reviewing team workloads are also considered important.

When it comes to reducing 'sickies', offering support such as flexibility in working hours is seen to influence employee behaviour the most (cited by 36% of respondents), followed by interventions by line managers (31%) and giving employees improved visibility of their absence levels (20%).

Attendance reviews are carried out by 83% of organisations, with 46% conducting these after every instance of unplanned absence. However, this also shows that one in five do not carry out this important process for establishing any trends or wellbeing concerns. Formal 'back-to-work' interviews are the most common review method used (78%), followed by informal one-to-ones (59%).



Conduct attendance reviews



Believe employees take sickies

CASE STUDY

Sagacity

Data solutions company Sagacity is using Cezanne's HR system to manage unplanned absences among its hybrid workforce, which has given line managers visibility of trends within their teams.

HR manager Jamie McKeenan said: "Because we're a client-facing company, a line manager may not have seen one of their individuals on their team for weeks or months on end – especially if they're working client-side. As a result, there were times [before Cezanne HR] when line managers wouldn't know whether staff were off or available, or whether they were in the office or off-site with clients.

"Now though, you can go into the absence module and check where everyone is. Employees find it really easy to log absences, and that in turn means things like holiday balances or sickness levels are easily accessible. It gives our managers a lot more control and they can easily let me know if HR need to step in.

"I can get a greater understanding of what's going on with a person. This means I can have better conversations with them and can help them create better solutions, helping them feel better about what might be going on and how we can help."

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AN EFFECTIVE ABSENCE MANAGEMENT POLICY



Unplanned and short-term absences will always be a part of the workplace. Whilst employers can't prevent their people from getting ill, there are several changes HR teams can make to ensure they strike the right balance between keeping unplanned absenteeism rates low, and ensuring people are not working when they should be resting.

1 Have a clear and easy to understand absence policy

Having a clear absence policy means everyone understands your stance on sickness absence and the procedures that need to be followed.

Try to keep the policy as simple as possible so there's no room for confusion or misinterpretation. Also, make sure you explain the policy during induction programmes and ensure it's easily accessible for employees to refer to when necessary.

2 Ensure fairness and transparency

Employees need to know that persistent, short-term absence for no good reason is not acceptable; but, if they are genuinely ill, they are not expected to come into work and won't be penalised for it.

With that in mind, it's essential to record absences effectively. This is where choosing absence management software can help. Should you find yourself having to take disciplinary action, it's vital you have the metrics available to support and justify this decision.

3 Apply your absence policy consistently

Your absence policy will be useless if managers are not applying it consistently. Make sure a culture of absence 'acceptance' isn't taking hold in some teams: either talk through the policy informally with all managers, or provide short internal training sessions to make sure everyone can apply your company's procedures correctly.

4 Discourage a 'soldier on' mentality when sickness strikes

Our research would indicate employees are continuing to work in some capacity while they are unwell – especially those working in hybrid/remote roles. Although the sentiment is admirable, a 'soldiering on' mentality when unwell has shown* to be damaging for both employees and organisations in the longer term and should be discouraged. In addition, it also makes monitoring sicknesses within a business a lot harder for HR teams.

Both employers and managers can set an example by resting when they themselves are sick, rather than sending the signal that work takes precedence over personal wellbeing – regardless if they're working in a shared space, or from the comfort of their home. This can also help remove any anxiety employees may feel about calling in sick if they're genuinely unwell.

5 Have more meaningful conversations

Many line managers can be uncomfortable dealing with genuine illness, particularly if it is serious. They don't know what questions are acceptable to ask or how they can support employees appropriately. After all, this is not a skill that comes naturally to all.

Consider putting together a training programme, or offering informal coaching to help managers gain the confidence to deal with difficult conversations.

6 Let absence management software do the hard work

Thanks to absence management software, it's now much easier to collect data about absence, identify patterns and assess the true cost to a business. Employees are often unaware of the impact absence has.

Don't keep the information your system gives you to yourself. If you share it openly with employees, they will begin to understand why it's important to keep absence under control.

7 Ensure you undertake back-to-work interviews

Back-to-work interviews are a great way to support your absence policy. The aim of the interview should be to understand why the person has been off ill, to make sure they are fit to return to work, and to discuss if any adjustments or short-term changes to working arrangements need to be made to facilitate their return.

People will think more carefully about whether to throw a sickie if they know that they will be required to explain the reasons for their absence.

Introducing Cezanne HR: software that works your way.

Cezanne HR is one of the fastest growing HR software providers for mid-sized and growing UK and international organisations. We provide a modern, secure Cloud HR system that lets companies quickly and effectively digitise, streamline and improve human resources management.

Covering the full employee lifecycle, Cezanne HR's on-line software includes integrated modules for core HR, recruitment, onboarding, absence and performance management, pulse surveys, time tracking, career and succession planning, workforce analytics, compensation planning and managed payroll – together with an integration platform service and open APIs to leading

With customers covering virtually every business sector, from financial services and legal firms to logistics and non-profits and experience reflecting decades of working with HR professionals worldwide, the Cezanne HR system is purposely designed to be exceptionally quick to deploy and easy to manage.

Cezanne HR's software offers incredible value for money without sacrificing the flexibility or depth of features required to support complex and evolving HR needs.



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