



'Presenteeism' on the rise as an estimated quarter of UK employees admit to working when ill

Businesses need to address 'presenteeism', as well as absenteeism says Robertson Cooper

11 November 2009 – Survey data from 39,000 UK workers presented by leading business psychology company, Robertson Cooper, has shown that a *quarter* of the people in the sample have recently struggled into work to show their bosses they are present, despite feeling ill. The research is part of the company's annual report on employee engagement and well-being at work in the UK. The report, *UK Perspectives on employee engagement and well-being*, is being launched today at Robertson Cooper's Business Well-Being Network annual conference in London.

This sample of employees working in the UK's public and private sectors rated their health and productivity levels over the past three months using Robertson Cooper's employee engagement and well-being assessment tool, ASSET. They were also asked if they had taken time off during this period and all the results were analysed in order to estimate rates of 'presenteeism.' Presenteeism is a complex issue, but one of its key features is when people feel compelled to turn up to the office when they are too ill to work and should be at home.

The results of the research were striking. Only 50% of UK workers in the sample reported good health, with the remainder describing their health as just 'alright' or 'poor'. However, despite not being at peak fitness, 26% of the employees in the whole sample reported taking no sick leave at all during their last three months at work. Unsurprisingly, this group also reported lower productivity than their 'healthier' colleagues - with just 38% claiming their productivity was at 90 per cent or above, compared with 51% of workers in the 'healthy' group. In particular, they reported poorer work relationships, a worse work-life balance and more work overload than their healthy counterparts.

Robertson Cooper warns that when employees come to work ill simply to show their faces and work unproductively the implications for company performance, and indeed the

economy as a whole, are damaging and costly. Recent influential government reviews have provided support for this argument, including last week's report into mental health from the National Institute of Clinical Excellence.

Professor Ivan Robertson, Managing Director at Robertson Cooper commented, "Presenteeism in the workplace has a number of causes, one of which is often related to feelings of job insecurity. Recently, this feeling is likely to have been inflamed as a result of the recession. People feel under pressure to be at work; they believe that by showing their faces even when they are ill, they are demonstrating their commitment, despite being unproductive. Businesses can't afford to ignore this problem."

"To prevent presenteeism, managers should reward people for the work they deliver, not the hours they put in. People should not feel obliged to work long hours to show their commitment and it's desirable if genuinely sick workers feel like they *should* take time off for everyone's benefit. In the long-term investing in the health and well-being of workers pays dividends in terms of improved employee engagement and productivity. It delivers considerable savings over and above those caused by driving down absenteeism. Most employers focus on reducing absenteeism levels and the associated costs, but often forget that tackling presenteeism is also a significant opportunity to reduce costs and improve productivity. Get both right and the impact on the business can be profound."

Dame Carol Black's 2008 report 'Working for a healthier tomorrow' which constituted a review of the health of Britain's working age population is a great source of advice on presenteeism. At first glance it appears to challenge the idea that it is inappropriate to be at work unless 100% fit, and hence seems to be actively promoting presenteeism! However, it endorses early return to work only when effective support strategies are in place and not to the extent where it may compromise an individual's sustained recovery. The innovative part of the idea is that early return to work can actually be used as a way of accelerating an employee's recovery. Several recommendations have now been accepted by the government and will be introduced into UK working life. For example, the traditional 'sick-note' issued by our doctors will be replaced with the new 'fit-note'. This changes the dialogue between doctor and patient and provides companies with a tool that actively helps to encourage early return to work, while at the same time ensuring presenteeism is kept to a minimum.

These findings signal a change in the way UK plc sees attendance and its management. Presenteeism is a relatively new idea, but the challenge does not exist in a vacuum.

Robertson Cooper is calling for a national debate looking at how businesses can find the right balance between absenteeism and presenteeism. This can be tricky, because there is a natural tension between the two issues - when one goes down the other is likely to go up. A certain level of both is inevitable, but understanding the relationship and finding the right level of each for specific organisations is the difficult part.

About Robertson Cooper Ltd

Robertson Cooper is a specialist in employee engagement and well-being in the workplace. As a leading authority on the business case for well-being in the UK, it provides products and expert advice that deliver tangible business benefits. The company was founded in 1999 by Professors Ivan Robertson and Cary Cooper with offices in Manchester and London. Robertson Cooper serves a wide range of public sector and blue-chip clients including, NHS Trusts, Criminal Justice, Central Government and Financial Services.

Robertson Cooper is also the founder of the Business Well-being Network. Set up in 2008, it is a community of more than 90 organisations (over half of which are from the public sector) that links HR, OD and Occupational Health & Safety professionals together to share experience and keep up with the latest developments in the fields of well-being and engagement.

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