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Absenteeism in U.S. workplace hits highest level in years

Workers are taking more unscheduled days off as bosses struggle to curb the practice.

Associated Press

Skipping work without good reason? You have lots of company.

Unscheduled absenteeism at U.S. companies and organizations has climbed to its highest level since 1999, according to results of a recent nationwide survey of human resource executives in U.S. companies and organizations.

The survey, conducted for CCH by the Harris Interactive consulting firm, put the U.S. absenteeism rate at 2.5 percent in 2006, up from 2.3 percent a year ago and the highest since seven years ago when it was 2.7 percent.

It found that personal illness accounts for only 35 percent of unscheduled absences, with the rest due to family issues (24 percent), personal needs (18 percent), stress (12 percent) and entitlement mentality (11 percent).

EXPENSIVE TREND

Regardless of the reason, the trend is costly for U.S. companies. CCH, which provides human resources and employment law information and services for businesses, said absenteeism costs some large employers an estimated \$850,000 per year in direct payroll costs -- more when factoring in lost productivity, morale and temporary labor costs.

'Organizations are engaged in a tug-of-war for their employees' time,' said Pamela Wolf, an employment law analyst for CCH. 'With unscheduled absences trending upward, companies need to get a good understanding of why employees are calling in sick at the last minute, what impact this has on other employees who are expected to pick up the slack, as well as the impact it has on customers and anyone else relying on the absent worker.'

PAID LEAVE BANK

The survey found that the use of "paid leave banks," also known as paid time off, are seen as the most effective way for companies to try to reduce unscheduled absences. Paid leave banks provide employees with a bloc of hours to be used for various purposes instead of having to take sick, vacation or personal time.

"Disciplinary action can be effective up to a point, but it can also encourage the wrong behavior if the result is that individuals who are ill come to work sick -- a problem known as presenteeism," Wolf said.

Despite higher rates of unscheduled absenteeism overall, CCH said, companies with low morale also have more ill workers showing up for work.

Results were based on an online survey of 326 human resource executives in 47 states from June 28 through July 17. No margin of error was given.

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