Increasing Productivity by Reducing Long-Term Sick Leave Through Mediation by Francis Portisford

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Employers are always keen to find new ways to keep workers positive and their productivity high while reducing the likelihood of them signing-off on long-term sick leave. This is an issue that can have a serious effect on profit margins and the general wellbeing of staff. With the general cost of running a business increasing all the time, a solution to this problem could improve worker moral and in turn, increase profits.

If employers have a strong support network in place, which includes procedures for dispute mediation and conflict resolution, employees are statistically more likely to return to work following a long-term absence for health reasons. This has been highlighted in a report detailing ways the Government hopes to reform the referral process for signing workers off for long-term sickness. The report proposes removing power from GPs and handing it to an independent assessment panel in order to achieve this.

The report, compiled by Dame Carol Black, Government director for health and work, also notes that the Government could ask employers to contribute to funding the new referral system. This could cause concern if you run a small or medium-sized enterprise (SME), therefore it is important to weigh up the cost of hiring independent mediators or purchasing the training they offer against the amount of revenue that could be lost by having an employee take sick leave. The effect that sharing out an absentee's workload could have on their colleagues' moral and productivity should be taken into account too. Therefore it is advisable to have procedures in place that can be easily implemented in the event of staff members falling ill.

A recent survey by Bupa supports this notion. Employees assigned to cover the workload of absent colleagues often suffer from increased stress levels. Companies without support measures in place to assist these workers run the risk of compromising their workforce's health, falling into a cycle of sick leave and stress that could very well harm their profit making potential.

Bupa's respondents were Human Resources managers sampled from one hundred private sector companies. Over half admitted that they did not have the systems in place to successfully handle case management of absentees' workload, or to provide psychological support for staff facing increased daily work schedules. This could easily be remedied through mediation training for managers or by hiring independent mediators for consultancy purposes.

It is understandable that owners of SMEs may be concerned that hiring an external mediation service to provide support, training or both, could prove costly in these austere times. But identifying simmering conflicts and addressing them before they effect staff health and wellbeing has the potential to save employers money and contribute to a more positive and productive working environment.

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