

Presenteeism...

... Don't Underestimate its Impact on Productivity

As an employee assistance professional you are likely familiar with the term “presenteeism.” But have your employee clients heard of it? More important, are your corporate clients aware of its impact on productivity? Simply put, presenteeism (pronounced prez.un.TEE.iz.um) is a term that describes how employees can physically come to work but not be productive on the job. In other words, they’re “there” physically, but their mind is somewhere else.

Presenteeism is one of the five main constructs in the Workplace Outcome Suite (WOS), an EPA-endorsed EAP Best Practice for measuring and evaluating work-related outcomes of EAP services. (**Editor’s note:** Additional WOS constructs and the importance of the WOS are discussed in this month’s cover story in *EAR*.)

Reasons for Declining Productivity

There are many reasons why people might come to work and not be productive. They include:

- *Physical sickness*, such as the common cold;
- *Emotional illness*, such as major depression or anxiety; and
- *Pre-occupation with issues at home*, such as an ill or aging parent, a sick child, a spouse facing job loss, a friend is getting divorced, the mortgage is coming due and you don’t have the money to pay it, and so on and so on.

We all know that there are a million things that can distract us from doing our best at work.

Defining Presenteeism

The term “presenteeism” has evolved over time, and it will likely continue to evolve in the future. Initially it meant just coming to work physically or emotionally ill. It has since expanded to include, as noted above, coming to work pre-occupied, possibly implying emotional

or mental health issues. In other words, *coming to work but bringing home along with you*.

One definition reads that presenteeism is: “a costly productivity-loss problem where employees show up for work but do not perform at 100%.” In other words, *present... but not* (present).

But is 100% productivity even reasonable? Only a manager or supervisor can decide. However, they should consider: How much effort and focus do THEY need from THEIR employees?

This concept is NOT the same thing as a “C” performer. Chances are most every employer has had employees who interviewed better than they ever performed on the job. Underperformance may require a heart-to-heart talk, additional training, mentoring or disciplinary measures.

Presenteeism, however, is often an issue related to an *already able* employee who is committed and shows up on time each day!

Presenteeism Affects the Work Culture

Presenteeism can affect the work culture over time. If one person becomes lackadaisical, this type of attitude can spread, and the next thing you know it employees begin to adapt an “everyone is doing it” mentality. We’ve all had a job or two where too much of “work time” was spent socializing with co-workers because this was a “normal” part of that particular work environment.

Recognizing that we are all social beings at heart, this problem can be rectified by having one 15-minute break in the morning, and one in the afternoon, for socializing. However, breaks don’t necessarily work. The majority of employees of one of our corporate clients took a morning break each day, and then went back to their cubicles after the break only to talk some more! Presenteeism lowers productivity – employees simply aren’t getting as much work done.

Presenteeism is Expensive

Let's quantify these statements. One survey of 1,149 employees (both full and part time) found that 25% admit to spending at least 1 hour per day dealing with personal issues. (**Editor's note:** And this is likely a very conservative estimate given the abundance of distracting personal electronics both at home but also elsewhere.)

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 64% of all unscheduled absences are due to:

- Family issues, 22%;
- Personal needs, 18%;
- Entitlement mentality, 13%; and
- Stress, 11%.

In addition, 61% of respondents said they went to work even when they were sick.

Presenteeism is expensive for your corporate clients! According to one estimate, presenteeism can cost an employer \$2,000 per employee per year. Let's examine how this issue stacks up to other company-paid medical costs:

- Of a 100-piece pie, payments toward medical and pharmaceutical claims for benefits equal 24%.
- Long-term disability takes up only 1%, as does workers' compensation.
- Short-term disability eats up 6%; and
- Compensation for time not worked (paid time off) is also 6%.

All told, the dollars wasted for lost or reduced productivity (presenteeism) is a whopping 63% (Cigna Corp., 2008). You do the math – it adds up quickly! Employees working at diminished capacity cost employers \$250 BILLION each year, and this problem doesn't end there!

Causes of Presenteeism

As stated earlier, is it reasonable to expect employees to be performing 100% all day, everyday? Consider the myriad of issues that can distract an employee from work:

- **Mental health issues** (including depression, anxiety, and alcohol and other drug issues);

- **Poor coping ability** (leading to increased stress); and
- **Family issues** (employees' children have problems, their parents are getting older, and the employee often feels "sandwiched" between all of them.

All of these distractions are problem- or stress-based factors. The following are some of the additional reasons why a person might not be productive at work.

❖ **Technology:** Cell phones and email make us accessible all of the time. However, this also means that technology can intrude on a person's workday very easily. Employees can balance their checkbook, say "hi" to Grandma, surf items they'd like to buy on eBay, and order a pizza all with a few clicks of a mouse.

In addition, many people find social networking like Facebook, Twitter, chat rooms, and instant messaging as great ways to keep in contact with old buddies, friends, and family. It's possible to "work" while keeping a chat screen open, and responding to "tweets" or "comments" while working at your desk.

This kind of multi-tasking divides efficiency and allows an employee to "kind of" pay attention to work all day. Technology was designed to make life easier, and in some respects it does, but it also has the very real and costly potential of keeping employees from getting work done! The end result is "continuous partial attention."

❖ **Blurred boundaries:** Another reason people struggle with presenteeism is that they are finding it harder and harder to separate work and home. On average, Americans work 164 more hours per year than they did 20 years ago. Employees today work more by keeping those tablets and smartphones on even while they're at home.

In other words, even though they're not "working," they are still "on the job." Maybe this makes some employees feel they "owe" their bosses an hour or more of work at home that they spent at the office on personal issues.

On the other hand, there are more family demands than ever. Kids are involved in sports, clubs and other extra-curricular activities, elderly

parents are developing age-related health issues, and owning more “stuff” – such as cars, boats, ATVs and computers – means more maintenance to take care of our possessions.

❖ **The economy and our “busy-ness”:** Let’s not forget today’s economic realities. Some people work more than one job just to make ends meet. In addition, people are just so “busy” that they don’t have time to do it all – so they feel that stealing “a few minutes” at work here and there is the only way to get everything done.

Impact on Work Culture

How do all of these areas affect the work culture? First, presenteeism can create work conflict. It’s challenging to work on a team with a person who doesn’t pull their own weight, and tempers can get short. Presenteeism can also cause poor work performance due to lack of diligence, distractibility, and poor attitude.

Increased stress also contributes to increased illness, decreased sleep, and low morale, which, in turn, contribute to presenteeism. This can become a vicious cycle, continuously reinforcing itself. In summary, presenteeism:

- Causes **work conflict**, such as short tempers with co-workers;
- Causes **poor work performance**, such as mistakes and other poor quality work, even short tempers with customers;
- Causes **increased illness**;
- Causes **sleep debt**, which leads to more errors and more work-related accidents; and
- Contributes to **low morale**.

What’s the Solution?

Here are some ideas to effectively prevent and mitigate presenteeism:

- ❖ *Be aware that this issue exists* – educate both supervisors and employees about this topic;
- ❖ *Offer resources and employee trainings* to help deal with life issues, such as stress, self care, time management, boundary setting, and assertiveness;
- ❖ *Be realistic about productivity* – don’t be

overzealous, but set work standards to be a little challenging, and yet attainable;

❖ *Provide flexible work hours if possible* – for instance, allow an employee to make up lost work time or work four 10-hour days, instead of five 8-hour days; and

❖ *Support and encourage wellness initiatives* – urge employee participation, offer incentives, and help build a culture of wellness.

Be Clear about what you Expect!

Because technology and interruptions from home are almost impossible to control in the workplace, focus on what you WANT from your employees instead of what you don’t want.

❖ Instead of patrolling the office for signs of Internet surfing and wasting time, set realistic productivity standards for staff. Use your leadership interactions to help with prioritization and boundary setting.

❖ Talk with employees about productivity standards and be willing to give high performers some latitude to get the work done (well) and take a break.

In an environment of increasing numbers of employees working remotely, we need to help supervisors and leaders quantify the outcomes the need from their teams instead of creating environments that feel to the employee like a police state. If your star performers come through with the work you expect of them, do you really want to pick a fight with them about checking Facebook on work time?

Summary

Presenteeism is an evolving term with more and more issues pressing on people’s time and energy than ever before. Presenteeism can be extremely costly, so prevention is the key. The best approaches are the ones that support employers and employees to deal with stress and manage time effectively. ■

Source: RaeAnn Thomas with Ascension / Employer Solutions EAP in Wisconsin. RaeAnn was a long-time contributor to EAR. She may be reached at raeann.thomas@ascension.org.

What can Management Do about Presenteeism?

❖ **Be aware of the issue and educate workers** – this applies to both managers and employees.

❖ **Offer resources** – such as a brown bag lunch training on time management, or perhaps one on managing stress.

❖ **If you don't already, offer an EAP!** – 60-70% of all EAP requests are for assistance in dealing with family, divorce, financial and other *non-workplace* issues. This requires time and expertise. Brown Bag trainings can help.

❖ **Be realistic** – can one person *really* complete all of the assigned tasks?

❖ **Focus on the important stuff** – and cut back on the small stuff.

❖ **Consider allowing flexible work time** – such as making up lost time and/or 4-day work weeks.

❖ **Offer wellness services** – get to know company issues; encourage participation; build a wellness culture; and fight the stereotypes of mental health and alcohol and other drug (AODA) issues and personal problems.

To recap:

- **Presenteeism** – we know what it is;
- We know what causes it;
- We know it is costly; and
- We know how to deal with it. ■

Source: RaeAnn Thomas.

More on Managing Presenteeism

The following are some important points to keep in mind for employees who struggle with being fully present at work while at work (or being fully present at home when at home):

❖ *Be clear about expectations and boundaries.* In other words, determine where you need boundaries to be and then stick to them with yourself and others.

❖ *Be aware of when work/personal boundaries are being pushed too far.* When you find yourself “straying” from your work, redirect your attention to where it is supposed to be.

❖ *Be assertive about what you need.* Advocate for yourself if you need help or support for personal issues that are affecting your work.

❖ *Manage time wisely.* Work out a system that works for you to keep your work pace consistent and do-able all day long without getting lazy or fatigued.

❖ *Structure your workday with an agenda.* Prioritize tasks and give yourself ample time to do them, but allow some room for flexibility. A schedule and time limits will help keep you on task.

❖ *Turn off instant messengers and social networking sites to limit distractions.* Set time aside to check emails, don't get stuck in your email every time a message comes in. ■

– RaeAnn Thomas