



# Workforce absence strategies

*Creating continuity plans to optimize productivity*

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Continuity planning. It's not a nice to have; it's a must-have. Without proper planning and policies, workforce absence can have a debilitating effect on a company's brand — and bottom line. A flight attendant's unexpected absence could result in the flight's cancellation if the crew is unable to meet federal aviation standards. A last-minute absence by a warehouse worker might lead to compromised safety measures and a job-related injury. A teacher's frequent intermittent absences, due to caregiver responsibilities, might mean lower test scores from students. If a manufacturing team is short on staff, workers may be rushed on the assembly line which would increase risk of product defects. In each of these scenarios, the talents and availability of skilled employees are absolutely essential to the continued delivery of products and services that customers have come to expect.



THE COST OF WORKFORCE ABSENCE  
IS SIGNIFICANT WITH COSTS ESTIMATES  
TOPPING 20% OF PAYROLL.

## UNDERSCORING THE NEED FOR EMPLOYER CONTINUITY PLANS

Collectively, the cost of workforce absence is significant, with estimates topping 20% of payroll. The direct costs alone can make up more than 15% of payroll when taking into account the wages, salaries and benefits of paid time off leaves; the cost of overtime to make up for the hours of work lost by those away; and the cost of replacement workers to fill in for those who are out. Add in another 6% of payroll for indirect costs like lower productivity from replacement workers still learning the job; the loss of coworker productivity from sharing the duties of those who are absent; and the lower efficiency of supervisors who become distracted from their own responsibilities. The resulting financial impact is significant.

Undoubtedly, the health of a workforce is directly correlated to an organization's productivity and performance. With strategic planning for next year already well underway by most businesses, this is an ideal time for employers to assess and refine their continuity plans and take a more holistic approach to workforce health, absence and productivity.

## UNDERSTANDING EMPLOYEE LEAVES

A comprehensive review of a company's absence data can provide the baseline for a productivity assessment and any necessary refinements to a continuity plan going forward. Absence data can also help identify the leave types that drive an organization's costs related to health, absence and productivity. With these insights, an organization can begin to customize health, wellness, disease management and absence programs to the unique needs of its workforce.

Most requests can be categorized as one of four leave types:

- **Predictable leaves** are planned and scheduled; they include paid time off for vacations or holiday celebrations.
- **Unexpected leaves** can be difficult to plan for and can arise from an employee's medical emergency, such as a surprise appendectomy or a child's inflamed tonsils that result in an unplanned trip to the pediatrician.
- **Continuous leaves** result in an employee being away from the workplace for an extended period of time. This leave type often comes with some advance notice that allows for alternative labor plans. Examples of continuous leave are maternity leave or a planned surgery for an existing medical condition.
- **Intermittent leaves** involve frequent, but often shortened, periods of time off from work. Intermittent leaves can be associated with severe migraine headaches, a series of physical therapy sessions or frequent doctor visits for a chronic illness.

## KEY STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES TO BOOST PRODUCTIVITY

All employees, at some point, will need time off from work. The key for employers is to ensure continuity plans are in place to maintain optimal productivity.

Some strategies and practices to consider:

**Create a culture of health, wellness and safety.** Many employers recognize there is an opportunity to promote good health, well-being and safety at the workplace. Seamlessly integrating safety and wellness programs can lead to higher levels of productivity, lower healthcare costs and improved quality of life for employees. Integrated programs are as varied as the organizations that implement them. And while employees, too, may vary, they share a lot of the same needs; we're all human, after all.

**Establish and incorporate continuity planning strategies.** Ensure specific continuity planning strategies are part of the overall leave of absence policy. These strategies will help minimize the amount of time an employee is away and allow for

alternative productive measures during absence. It is important to ensure continuity planning is understood by the entire organization and recognized as a way to help swiftly replace or make up for an absent worker's responsibilities.

### **Institute a job sharing plan.**

Job sharing allows employees to gain experiences at different roles within their department or organization. For example, a restaurant employee could learn the skill sets of a dining room server and a host. In addition to helping boost business productivity, this could also be an effective tool to help individual employees chart a broader career path. Job sharing can be a particularly effective strategy for addressing absences associated with unexpected or intermittent leave requests.

**Contract with a temporary staffing agency.** For certain industries, staffing agencies can provide a temporary source of labor when employee absences occur. They are most frequently used in unskilled labor positions, although certain agencies specialize in skilled labor such as nursing and healthcare services. With these types of arrangements, it is important to ensure managers and

supervisors are aware of this option, and know how and when to submit a request for a temporary worker.

### **Review accommodation**

**practices.** Accommodations can play a major part in a business' continuity plan. For example, the more flexibility employers can offer with respect to schedule, remote work or equipment requests, the better prepared they will be to address leave requests that arise. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic those employers who were prepared and equipped to allow employees to work remotely were better able to maintain higher levels of production during periods of business shutdowns. More traditional accommodations to maintain productivity may include such accommodation equipment as sit/stand desks or increased lighting. Adjustments to the work schedule can also be an effective accommodation in the case of an employee who needs to take five-minute breaks every half hour or is allowed a two-hour window twice a week to complete physical therapy. Creative accommodations are sometimes expensive, but still strong sources of productivity.



CREATIVE ACCOMMODATIONS ARE  
STRONG SOURCES OF PRODUCTIVITY  
AND CAN PLAY A MAJOR PART IN  
BUSINESS' CONTINUITY PLANS.

**Incorporate technology.**

Technology advancements are exploding. Today, technology provides employers access to real-time data more than ever before. When an unexpected leave request is reported, the right technology can ensure the time it takes to reach the affected manager or supervisor is minimal, and allows more time to address the unfilled position and schedule.

**PUTTING THESE STRATEGIES TO WORK**

The COVID-19 pandemic caused virtually every business to reassess the value of its workforce, and to reconsider how to achieve optimum productivity levels and meet consumer demands. A healthy, highly engaged employee is a productive employee, and productive employees are the backbone of successful organizations. While employee absences and time off work are very much a part of the production cycle, it is clear there are practices and protocols employers can use when leave requests arise to ensure the engines of commerce race on.