

Present, but a long way from correct



There is a growing awareness of giving staff a flexible/better work-life balance to combat stress

— By Carl Jones —

The number of days being lost to sickness is on the decline across the majority of Shropshire's leading employment sectors, according to latest figures.

That's a good thing, right? Well, maybe, but it might not be telling the full story.

Because these figures go side-by-side with reports of a potentially more serious epidemic lurking under the surface, and apparently spreading quickly.

It's been branded 'presenteeism'... and is basically the opposite to absenteeism; applied to a person who reports for duty, even though they are fully aware that they're not firing on all cylinders, and probably should have stayed at home.

It could also go some way to explaining why Britain's productivity figures continue to fall behind many of our international rivals, despite the UK's unemployment rate of 3.9% at its lowest in over 40 years.

A study by health insurer Vitality has found that more than 40% of employees said their work was being affected by health problems – up by more than 30% on five years ago. It found that people are putting aside both mental and physical health

problems to attend work. And in its annual Health and Well-Being at Work Survey Report the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development also found evidence of unhealthy trends in the workplace.

The CIPD said more than four-fifths of respondents had observed presenteeism in their organisation, amid feeling that the situation was getting worse

The UK has become the unpaid overtime capital of Europe. It is estimated that employees are giving away an average of £5,038 of their time every year, amounting to a whopping £164.8 billion annually across the working population.

It suggests the onus for combatting presenteeism falls largely on bosses to foster the right kind of workplace culture

So, is this something more serious than the good old fashioned British stiff upper lip, and our tendency to roll up our sleeves and simply get on with it? There are a number of suggestions:

- It could be that people are turning up at work without a clean bill of health because they fear losing their job.
- It might be that their workload is so

large that a person feels they simply can't spare the time off, and the stress it would cause.

- Or it may be that they are worried that colleagues will think they are pulling a fast one, and are not really ill at all.

In reality, the consensus is that presenteeism is caused by a combination of all of the above. All of which suggest that the onus for combatting presenteeism falls largely on bosses to foster the right kind of workplace culture.

Ben Harper, senior partnership manager at Energize Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin, says: "I think presenteeism is something most people know of, but not by this name.

"I usually explain it as 'you're at work, but you're not at work'. Being physically active and encouraging active breaks can really help presenteeism in the day-to-day working of a business."

There is certainly a growing awareness of the need to give staff a more flexible work-life balance. In the most radical examples, some businesses now offer staff the choice of spreading their 35-40 weekly hours across either four days, instead of five.

I was talking to a middle manager called Bob the other day, working for a fairly large company in Telford. He didn't want to come across as a whistleblower, so I've changed his name to protect his identity.



Ben Harper – we've all seen presenteeism

He's worked for this company for more than 13 years, and says he has seen workloads rise, deadlines tighten, pressure ratchet up. As a result, he feels the atmosphere has changed dramatically, and there's no longer time for a chat about the latest episode of Game of Thrones at the coffee machine.

Bob feels he simply can't afford to take unscheduled time off, for risk that he won't be able to make up the lost ground, and that sometimes, he has so much racing round in his head that he 'zones out'.

"I've got no doubt that my mental health is suffering, and that's a tough one because it's not as obvious as sitting at the desk with a streaming cold," he says.

"But it impacts on your ability to think clearly when you have a long list of tasks to get through – and sometimes, you feel



Fear factor – Teresa Boughey

like you're wading through mud. And when everyone's busy, you don't feel like there is time to go into the boss's office and say 'can I have a quiet word?'" There just isn't that kind of atmosphere."

According to Shropshire-based HR and diversity specialist Teresa Boughey, of Jungle HR, there are several reasons for presenteeism.

"Yes there is the 'fear factor', a desire to keep a job and not be recognised as someone that has time off sick or for family or caring responsibilities, but there could also a desire to prove your worth in order to be considered for promotion.

"So, for example, making the effort to be 'seen' by the right people, at the right time. I recall working with a colleague who would make sure that he was seen when he arrived, look to lunch with someone

influential and then at the end of the day, watch to see when the boss left so he could hot foot it out of the door. His presenteeism paid off as he was often selected to attend high-profile events on behalf of the company."

In Teresa's experience, presenteeism can also be driven by an individual's preference for perfectionism, which means that they put in extra time and effort into getting something right.

Or it could be borne out of a deep-seated loyalty which is held by the individual – loyalty to the company, colleagues and customers.

A driven individual will often put in extra effort and commitment in order to complete a task/project, or deliver exceptional service to others, Teresa says.

"The danger is that with both of these examples, presenteeism can lead to burn-out and stress-related symptoms. Managers should get to know their staff, tune in to their capabilities and their ability to cope with stress points and notice changes in behaviour.

"Fair-minded companies can build a more inclusive environment by being more aware of presenteeism and individuals' behaviour, and by ensuring they have the measures to support those experiencing stress in the workplace."

● *What do you think? Do you work for a compassionate employer which is actively trying to combat presenteeism? Are you a boss which would encourage staff to work their hours over four days, instead of five? Tell us your story.*

Email editor@shropshirebiz.com

Don't keep putting it off

Updating your website doesn't need to be as painful as you think, get in touch to have one less thing on your to-do list

Contact the creative digital experts

5 Town Walls, Shrewsbury, SY1 1TW
01743 344 911 done@cleardesign.co.uk cleardesign.co.uk



clear