

Guidance Note: Health for Work Advice Line

Free Health for Work Advice Line for small businesses



Is sickness absence causing you a financial headache?

Many owners and managers of small firms will have experienced how the health of an individual affects their performance. Looking after the health of employees is an essential part of running an efficient business to ensure sickness absence is managed and return to work times reduced.

Research by NHS Plus has found that mental ill health accounts for 26.3% of absences with work-related stress, depression and anxiety having a significant impact on small businesses. It is estimated that around 13.7 million working days are lost each year due to mental ill health, costing the equivalent of £1,035 per year for every employee in the UK workforce.

Physical health problems account for 25.4% of absences. These health related issues can have a significant impact on the profitability of a small business but many employers are unaware of the impact it's having. Typical costs can include recruiting new staff or finding short-term cover and loss of revenue/operating profit from work not being completed while an employee is off sick.

In the manufacturing industry, the major cause of ill health involves musculoskeletal injury such as back injury from repetitive lifting or other tasks. The NHS Plus Health for Work Adviceline (0800 0 77 88 44) allows small business owners and managers to step in early and tackle any workplace health problems and will provide advice on how to reduce sickness absence, as well as how to help an employee with a health condition either stay at work, or return to work more quickly.

Sayed Khan, Chief Medical Advisor for EEF, (formerly the Engineering Employers' Federation, says, "Small business owners and managers often do not know where to turn for advice so this Adviceline is a real asset, giving them a trusted, professional source of advice that is confidential, impartial and free to use."

The food and drink industry is the UK's largest manufacturing sector, representing over 15% of turnover and employment. Angela Coleshill, HR Director for The Food and Drink Federation says: "As a major UK employer we take the health of our workforce very seriously. We believe that good health is good business – decreasing absenteeism and increasing employee engagement. The 'Health for Work Adviceline' is welcome news for small businesses in the manufacturing industry – it enables employers to get first hand access to professional advice that is designed to offer practical solutions to their specific situation.

"By having this support to effectively address the issue of employee ill health, businesses are better equipped to minimise the impact of staff illness and provide support to staff who want to stay at work or return after a period of sickness absence."

Estimate how much absenteeism is costing your business

You can calculate the financial impact of staff health issues on your own business by going to www.health4work.nhs.uk where there is a Business Cost Calculator which gives you a snapshot of the costs you're likely to face depending on your industry sector and size of your organisation. To do this click on **Your Business** graphic box. You will then see an **Explorer** graphic window that asks that you click on your **business sector**. Then click on **your business size**. The next **Explorer** window offers the Business Cost Calculator box where you are invited to **re-enter your number of employees** and then click on **Calculate**. The cost is given in the box below.

For an employer with 100 employees in the manufacturing industry, the Business Cost Calculator provides an average cost of £75,400 per annum – if the employer were to have more severe work place health problems, the financial costs of employee ill health could be much higher.

Easy to follow action plan from NHS Plus

A small business recently called the 'Health for Work Adviceline' about an employee showing signs of mental stress in the workplace over a period of months. Despite a supportive attitude from her employer and colleagues during this time, the employee had not wished to reveal the reason for her distress and her frequent absences from work and obvious unhappiness were now impacting on her work performance.

The employer, like those in many small businesses, had neither the experience nor the resources to deal with what was a complex mental health issue. By calling the Adviceline she was able to directly access advice from an experienced NHS Plus occupational health specialist practitioner.

The employer, who wishes to remain anonymous due to the sensitive nature of the problem, says, "There's masses of information out there, but as a small business, I did not have the time to try and find a solution that I could implement quickly, efficiently and within a legal context. The service I found did just this and gave me an easy to follow action plan that was all free!"

The call resulted in the employer being given a concise list of issues to consider and possible ways of resolving them, including arranging an informal meeting in a neutral location.

"It has been a relief to find the free helpline run by NHS Plus dealing specifically with the individual concerns of small businesses," says the employer. "I spoke to an experienced occupational nurse who was incredibly easy to talk to and whose advice was easy to follow and implement. She directed me to all the necessary procedures that I had to undertake to fulfil my obligations as an employer, such as a stress risk assessment. I was also directed to the exact pages on relevant organisations' websites where I could download a formatted GP referral letter. A useful follow-up report and contact details for further advice were also sent to me."

If the situation developed into a capability issue, then workplace adjustments could be made, including the assignment of support 'buddies', counselling options, and setting of goals such as a 12-week review, while maintaining regular lines of communication.

"To just be able to talk directly to someone with professional expertise has been wonderful. Her advice has given me the confidence I need to now go ahead and help our member of staff," the employer says.

The Health for Work Advice Line is:-

- **Free**
- **Confidential**
- **Supportive and knowledgeable – expert help from experienced occupational health nurses**
- **Proactive – develop a plan to reduce instances of employee ill health and absenteeism from occurring in your business**
- **Accessible – call the Adviceline today or when a problem occurs**

Tel:- 0800 0 77 88 44

Website:- www.health4work.nhs.uk

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