

Top Seven Considerations to Help Administer Leaves of Absence

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Do you know approximately how much time your human resources department spends managing absence every week? And how much time this translates into yearly?

This fact may surprise you:



Results from one survey found that supervisors spent 4.2 hours a week or a whopping 5.3 weeks per year focused on absence-related issues.¹

Managing absence can be a very time-consuming and tricky endeavor. One reason is that understanding and applying federal and state leave laws can be a headache, and if interpreted incorrectly, a litigious heartache. And when you add on the challenge of maintaining a successful return-to-work program, suddenly managing absenteeism can be a full-time job. It's no wonder that managers, supervisors, and entire human resource departments may be left feeling stressed out with little confidence in their leave management program.

The truth is managing absence efficiently is not easy. Here are a few quick considerations to help manage leaves of absence and reduce stress in the process.

¹ Society for Human Resource Management, Kronos. *Total Financial Impact of Employee Absence in the U.S.* December, 2014.

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1. Recognize the Time Commitment

The first step in managing absence may be to just set the stage. Managers need to be prepared and recognize that employee absences, both planned and unplanned, are inevitable. It's vital to understand why an employee is taking a leave or the scope of the circumstances for the leave. The bottom line? Human resources and management must acknowledge and plan for the time and commitment to process the leave correctly.



2. Ease the Administrative Burden

Designating a single point person for managing leaves can help simplify and manage absence more effectively. Consider assigning someone the role of leave specialist and providing formal training for him or her. In addition to basic instruction regarding employee rights, compliance, leave laws, and policies, the point person should have an idea of the scope of employee leaves and life events that trigger them. He or she should ask questions and have a basic understanding of the prognosis or injury. The assigned point person should have access to legal counsel, such as weekly calls to attorneys specializing in employment law or leaves.



3. Stay Compliant

Staying current with emerging state leave laws and statutory paid state leaves is challenging. An employer may be required to comply with an array of different leave laws depending on the company's size and location.

First employers need to provide time and training for management to understand how the particular leave laws which apply to the employer function together. Human resources and managers need to grasp which leave laws run concurrently and develop best practices and methods to manage legal and regulatory developments.



4. Maintain a Central Portal

Tracking, documenting, scheduling, and managing leaves can feel like balancing spinning plates. To simplify the process, employees need a central portal to report their absence. Either by phone or on line, workers should be able to report Short Term Disability (STD) and Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) absences easily and quickly. Communication channels need to stay open to help employees understand eligibility, processes, and decisions

Casual return-to-work (RTW) guidelines can be inconsistent, haphazard, and confusing. Make your RTW program a formal affair with a written RTW policy.



5. Ready, Set, Report

The old expression “the devil’s in the details” rings true here. Being able to run detailed, complete reports is paramount to understanding leave patterns and absences. Reports should be run and examined frequently and include information such as disability usage patterns, claimant status, and disability costs; FMLA usage patterns and claimant status; and integrated disability and FMLA information.



6. Eliminate the Paper Trail

Using a paper-based system or even using multiple spreadsheets to coordinate different leave types can be rife with manual error. Intermittent leaves can compound the complexity of overseeing and recording. Consider using leave management software to track and manage leaves, which will allow information to be handled in one central repository. Automating leave management has many advantages, such as automatically monitoring leave requests and evaluating them against leave balances.



7. Develop a Proper RTW Program

Casual return-to-work (RTW) guidelines can be inconsistent, haphazard, and confusing. Make your RTW program a formal affair with a written RTW policy. Establish modified/flexible work arrangements; guidelines for duration of disability based on diagnosis; and accommodations to facilitate RTW. Encourage interactive dialogue between the employee, manager, human resources, and the physician. And when necessary engage nurse case management.

The Merits of Outsourcing

Overall, leaves of absence should be considered holistically across all product lines, and employers need to find compliant, fair, and cost-efficient ways to manage leaves.

Outsourcing can help take the administrative burden off the employer and human resources and help ensure legal compliance. Employers need to focus on running and overseeing business operations, and when leave management begins to hinder productivity, consider changes or changing strategies.

The material presented herein is not intended to provide legal or other expert advice as to any of the subjects mentioned, but rather is presented for general information only. You should consult knowledgeable legal counsel or other knowledgeable experts as to any legal or technical questions you may have.

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