



RED RIVER COLLEGE

ABSENTEEISM MANAGEMENT

EMPLOYEE GUIDE

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WHAT IS ABSENTEEISM MANAGEMENT?

Absenteeism Management assists employees in understanding attendance requirements at work and supports employees in effectively managing absenteeism through discussions and coaching.

Absenteeism Management is based upon the following principles and guidelines:

- All employees have a contractual obligation to attend work as scheduled
- Effective education about and management of employee absenteeism helps employees realize the impact of their absenteeism and the importance of regular attendance at work.
- Absenteeism management is not a disciplinary process. It clearly communicates attendance expectations and encourages improved attendance when required.

WHY IS ATTENDANCE IMPORTANT?

Red River College (RCC) recognizes that dependable attendance is a necessary component for effective and efficient service delivery. The quality of service provided by the college is affected by a number of factors, including employee work performance and absenteeism. Employees are expected to report to work on a regular and consistent basis, to be on time, and to work their regularly-scheduled workday.

Absenteeism affects the quality and consistency of service delivery and places a burden on co-workers, who are often assigned extra duties to cover for the absent employee. In addition, an individual may not be able to complete his or her own work in a timely fashion because he or she is dependent upon the absent employee for important information and/or the performance of an associated task.

This guide has been developed, based upon best practice, as determined through an extensive review of current literature, together with successful absenteeism management programs operating in similar organizations across Canada. It has been refined through internal consultations with managers, MGEU representatives and return-to-work specialists. This guide is consistent with the MGEU collective agreement, provincial legislation, and internal policies and procedures. It aims to improve employee absenteeism through open communication between managers and the people who report to them.

WHAT DOES ABSENTEEISM MANAGEMENT ADDRESS?

Non-Culpable Absenteeism:

Sometimes referred to as "Innocent Absenteeism", non-culpable absences are absences from work resulting from factors generally considered to be beyond the employee's control, such as illness or injury. Such absences are not dealt with through discipline. Instead, these absences are managed through discussion and coaching using the Absenteeism Management process.

Culpable Absenteeism:

This is absence from work that is generally considered to be the result of factors within the control of the employee, either partially or entirely. These include leaving work early without authorization, not following established call-in procedures, repeated lateness, etc. These types of absences are managed separately, as employees may be subject to disciplinary action, up to and including termination of employment, depending upon the severity of the situation.

THE VALUE OF ABSENTEEISM MANAGEMENT

Red River College is committed to providing excellence in post-secondary education. Dedicated staff who meet their employment obligations through regular attendance are essential to fulfilling this commitment.

Absenteeism Management is the managerial process for creating a workplace culture that encourages regular attendance. It does so by setting reasonable expectations for staff attendance, managing their absenteeism, and holding both managers and staff accountable for meeting expectations.

For any employment relationship to be successful, employees must attend work regularly. While perfect attendance is not a reasonable expectation, it is reasonable that staff absences not exceed average absence rates for similar workplaces in Canada.

Needless to say, an effective Absenteeism Management program results in much lower levels of staff absence. Absenteeism management has two parts:

GENERAL ABSENTEEISM MANAGEMENT

Strategies and sound management practices focused upon an entire staff group which encourage and support regular attendance.

INDIVIDUALIZED ABSENTEEISM MANAGEMENT (IAM)

Strategies and efforts focused upon building a program specific to an individual in order to assist that person with improving absenteeism.

ABSENTEEISM MANAGEMENT DEFINITIONS

It is important to understand the following terminology:

Absence

Any time an employee, who is scheduled or otherwise expected to be at work, is not at work.

Attendance

Being at work on time and remaining at work as scheduled, performing designated duties, and adhering to designated work breaks.

Culpable Absenteeism

An absence from work where the employee is at fault. Culpable absenteeism includes:

- Arriving late or leaving work early and not adhering to designated work breaks without approval or suitable justification
- Absence without approval or suitable justification

Culpable absence usually calls for a disciplinary response and does not apply to the Absenteeism Management process or the Individual Absenteeism Management (IAM) plan.

Excess Absenteeism

Absences which exceed the “norm” for the employee’s comparator group. The comparator group is used to compare certain types of employees in similar occupations in order to arrive at statistical averages. It is determined by the employer and may be the average of the division, school, department, employee group, etc. On occasion, an individual’s absenteeism record will reach a level of concern which requires a meeting with management or human resources. The number of absences which trigger this response is determined by the average level of absence which occurs within an employee’s comparator group.

Non-culpable Absenteeism

Non-culpable, or “Innocent Absenteeism”, is an absence for which the employee is not considered at fault. These are often due to factors outside the direct control of the employee. Such absences do not call for a disciplinary response nor do they ever form part of the progressive discipline process or the disciplinary record. Rather, efforts to reduce these absences are dealt with through Absenteeism Management and/or an IAM.

Pattern Absenteeism

Pattern absences are absences which may appear to be non-culpable when viewed individually. However, a closer look might suggest a pattern of absenteeism with possible culpability.

For example:

- Is the employee often absent every third Thursday of the month?
- Are there sick calls before or after a scheduled day or stretch of days off (e.g. weekends, scheduled days off, vacations)?
- Are there sick calls after being denied time off?
- Are there sick calls after being counseled or disciplined?
- Are there sick calls after uttering intention (i.e. if ... then I am going to call in sick)?

GENERAL ABSENTEEISM MANAGEMENT

In addition to reducing the cost of unwarranted absence, managing absenteeism has additional benefits:

- Well-managed employee absenteeism promotes higher staff morale, a fairer workload allocation, improved workplace efficiency, and a quality-service work environment;
- Timely and effective efforts focused upon good workplace attendance are linked to improved health, wellness and quality of work life for staff; and
- The reduction of unwarranted absences relieves co-workers of extra duties placed upon them and allows them to complete their own work. This is especially true if they are dependent upon the absent employee for information and/or the performance of an associated task.

Principles and Guidelines

The key elements of managing absenteeism well are based upon the following principles and guidelines:

- Staff must be committed to their jobs and the students/clients they serve;
- Staff have a contractual obligation to attend work and to use sick leave only for its intended purpose;
- Reduced staffing levels due to unwarranted absences affects students and co-workers;
- Managing absenteeism and communicating expectations to staff is an important management function;
- Attendance is directly correlated with effective management;
- Workplace absences translate into substantial financial, operational and quality costs;
- The focus of managing absenteeism is upon removing barriers to regular attendance and rewarding regular attendance;
- Managing absenteeism is not a disciplinary process;
- Each employee brings unique circumstances to the workplace and absenteeism shall be looked upon individually and evaluated based upon its own circumstances;
- Efforts to manage absenteeism succeed when all parties fully engage and cooperate in the process; and
- Dealing with excess absence is the responsibility of management, but all employees can play a role in improving absenteeism.

Roles, Rights & Responsibilities

Any successful approach to absenteeism management requires an understanding of, and respect for, the roles, rights and responsibilities of employees, employers, human resources, and unions.

Employees

- Fulfilling their contractual obligation to attend work as prescribed
- Attending work for all scheduled hours, unless unable to for legitimate reasons
- Improving and maintaining personal health and adjusting lifestyle, where necessary, to enable regular attendance
- Making reasonable efforts to attend to personal affairs and obligations (including medical appointments, if possible) on their own personal time and not during normal working hours
- Reporting all occurrences and/or absences from work in accordance with the employer's absence reporting procedure
- Reporting work-related injuries and/or illness directly to their manager immediately as they occur and completing required forms
- Providing appropriate and sufficient medical documentation
- Fully participating in early and safe return-to-work initiatives and workplace accommodations.
- Fully participating in efforts to identify and implement strategies to improve absenteeism
- Maintaining regular communication with the manager and/or designate during absences and providing information on the expected duration of absence and possible return-to-work date.
NOTE: Employees may be required to provide medical clearance stating restrictions, if any, prior to being permitted to return to work

Employer/Manager

- Managing absenteeism of the staff reporting to them and communicating expectations
- Informing employees about absenteeism expectations and addressing all employee questions and concerns or directing them to the appropriate department (e.g. Occupational Health and Safety, Human Resource Services)
- Implementing appropriate steps under an IAM as required
- Maintaining regular contact with, and providing support to, an employee who is absent from work
- Ensuring that the provisions of the Collective Agreement are followed
- Respecting legislation related to employment (e.g. Human Rights Code)
- Maintaining the confidentiality of employee information

Human Resource Services

- Providing Managers and Employees with clear guidelines related to employee absenteeism
- Providing training and advice to Managers, as required, on General Absenteeism Management and IAM
- Providing appropriate reporting mechanisms for staff, management and the College
- Providing advice and support to managers and staff in the management of attendance
- Ensuring that IAM programs are administered consistently and fairly
- Ensuring appropriate consultation with Unions

Unions

- Educating and supporting members with respect to regular attendance
- Identifying strategies to assist individual members in their efforts to improve absenteeism

HOW DOES ABSENTEEISM MANAGEMENT AFFECT ME?

In general, Absenteeism Management is required if an employee's absences due to sick leave, paid and/or unpaid, are considered excessive.

As defined earlier, excessive absence means above average absenteeism when compared with the average absenteeism of other employees in similar occupations (comparator group average). Comparing employees' absenteeism helps to identify if there may be an absenteeism concern and, if so, to what extent. (For example: comparing an employee's absenteeism with a similar department, division, facility and/or unit average.)

Absences typically considered in Absenteeism Management include:

- sick leave with pay (including sick leave used for medical/dental appointments)
- sick leave without pay (including medical/dental appointments without pay)

Example of Absenteeism Management in Use:

A supervisor notices an employee has been frequently calling in sick. When the supervisor compares the employee's absenteeism to the work unit, the absenteeism records confirm that the employee calls in sick almost twice as often as the average of the work unit. The supervisor meets with the employee to have an informal discussion surrounding his absenteeism. During this discussion, the employee reveals an injury that occurred offsite six months ago (non-work-related injury). Since that time, when the employee has been coming to work, he has been working through pain and discomfort. As a result of the discussion, the employee and the employer are able to make simple adjustments to the employee's workstation, which significantly reduces his pain and discomfort. As a result, the employee's absenteeism improves dramatically.

Does Absenteeism Management Always Apply?

Absenteeism Management does not always apply, even if an employee's absenteeism is excessive.

Supervisors must use their discretion when managing absenteeism. While general procedures are outlined, absenteeism concerns must be addressed on a case-by-case basis due to the many unique circumstances which can affect absenteeism.

- In general, Absenteeism Management is not applied in the following scenarios:
- If all or most of the absences are related to a single, isolated circumstance, such as a specific illness/injury (example: an employee has good attendance but contracted pneumonia and was absent from work for two weeks).

- If an employee is absent due to a workplace injury.
- If an employee has had good attendance, but is using sick leave as part of an approved return to work accommodation plan.

Although these absences still form part of an employee's personal absenteeism record, an Individual Absenteeism Management (IAM) plan may not be necessary.

THE INDIVIDUAL ABSENTEEISM MANAGEMENT (IAM) PLAN

IAM is the acronym for Individual Absenteeism Management. IAM has been developed by the College to assist Managers in their efforts to work with individual staff to address concerns relating to absenteeism.

An IAM consists of a number of supportive meetings in which a manager will meet with an employee to discuss current absenteeism levels and to communicate expectations. As well, the manager assists the employee in effectively managing absenteeism through discussions and coaching. This process is not disciplinary. Rather, its aim is to raise awareness, identify the issue and to offer additional supports if needed.

Summary of IAM Steps:

Pre-Step

When absenteeism concerns arise, a supervisor should discuss them with the employee as they arise. If the absenteeism concerns continue, the supervisor meets with HR to assess whether the application of an individualized absenteeism management program (IAM) is appropriate. If it is determined between the supervisor and Human Resource Services that an IAM is appropriate, the supervisor will schedule a meeting with the employee – See Step #1 below.

Step #1: Formal Attention to Absenteeism

Formal attention to absenteeism must be initiated when an employee's absenteeism has not improved after the initial informal discussion and continues to exceed the comparator group average. The manager will meet with the employee and advise that he or she will be moved to a formalized IAM.

Step #2 Additional Formal Attention to Absenteeism

When an employee's absenteeism continues to exceed the comparator group average and the employee's attendance has not improved following the first formal discussion, the manager will meet with the employee and advise that he/she has not improved attendance to the satisfaction of the employer. Strategies, such as those previously discussed, should be reviewed and possibly revised in order to improve absenteeism and to provide further support.

Step #3 Formal Attention to Absenteeism - Notice of Possible Termination

If an employee's absenteeism continues to exceed the comparator group average and the employee's attendance has not improved, as outlined in the previous documented discussions, the employee may be given notice of possible termination. It is of key importance at this meeting that the employee be advised that if satisfactory improvement is not achieved, an assessment will be made which may determine whether employment will continue or whether it will be terminated due to his/her inability to attend work on a regular basis.

Step #4 Termination of Employment (Non-Disciplinary Termination)

The objective of the Absenteeism Management process is to encourage and assist employees in achieving regular and consistent attendance at work and to provide support to employees in achieving that goal. However, in cases of prolonged excessive absenteeism from work which cannot be resolved with any of the above measures, it may become evident that the employment relationship must end.

Termination of employment for non-culpable absenteeism requires the employer to clearly demonstrate, through documented objective evidence, that:

1. The employee has a history of excessive absenteeism and was aware of the absenteeism and of the need to improve attendance to a reasonable level. In addition, the consequences of failing to meet those expectations have been clearly communicated and documented to the employee; and
2. There is no reasonable basis to conclude that the employee's absenteeism record will improve in the future. This may be supported by medical evidence or by documented evidence of failed efforts to improve.

The onus of demonstrating the above rests with the **employer**. The employer must show that termination is justified and the employment relationship is no longer viable.

The employer has duty to accommodate a recognized disability, unless such accommodations result in undue hardship. Termination of an employee may take place if such accommodations have proven unsuccessful.

REPORTING ABSENCES AND SUPPLYING MEDICAL INFORMATION

All employees are responsible for following the proper call-in procedures when absent from work. If they are uncertain of these procedures, employees must contact their immediate supervisor for confirmation.

Why are Medical Certificates Requested?

When an employee is absent from the workplace due to an illness or injury, the employer may request that the employee provide a medical certificate. When this occurs, the onus is on the employee to provide a satisfactory medical certificate. Medical certificates are typically requested in order to:

- provide verification of illness or injury
- determine if there are any accommodations being recommended; and/or
- determine when the employee should be able to safely return to work

Note: Any personal health information obtained is sent to Human Resource Services to ensure secure and confidential storage.

WHAT IF A DISABILITY IS AFFECTING ABSENTEEISM?

Individuals may suffer from medical ailments which affect their attendance, such as a cold or flu. However, where absenteeism results from a disability (i.e. A chronic, long-term medical condition), a higher threshold in terms of absence levels may be accepted and the employee must be reasonably accommodated.

An employee experiencing difficulty attending work due to a disability should notify his or her supervisor or manager so that reasonable accommodations can be made (this may include a modified return-to-work program, modified work schedule, or a higher threshold of absenteeism rate). An employee's initial contact may be with another individual if he or she feels more comfortable. For example, if an employee would rather approach the Human Resource Services to discuss a disability before approaching a manager or supervisor, he or she is encouraged to do so.

Note: If an employee indicates that a disability is affecting absenteeism, the employer may request medical information. This request is made to see if and how the employee can best be accommodated.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. Why is the Absenteeism Management process being implemented now?

Absenteeism Management and the Absenteeism Management process is not a new expectation or process within the College. This guide has been developed to better and more fairly assist employees in understanding absenteeism expectations.

2. Can I be disciplined for being sick?

The Absenteeism Management process is not a disciplinary process. The purpose of Absenteeism Management is to assist employees in understanding absenteeism requirements and to support employees in effectively managing absenteeism through discussions and coaching.

3. Can I no longer use sick leave I have accumulated?

Employees can still use their sick leave. Sick leave is available to assist employees who are unable to be at work as a result of illness or injury. However, Management has a responsibility to monitor absenteeism and the performance of all employees and discuss concerns that may arise with employees. This includes discussions surrounding improving attendance.

4. Are you saying that I am not actually sick when I call in sick?

No. The legitimacy of sick leave is not being questioned. However, it is important that management discuss attendance with employees, especially if absences are excessive.

5. Can I bring my union representative to an Absenteeism Management meeting?

Because Absenteeism Management for non-culpable absenteeism is a non-disciplinary process, employees do not require union representation at the meetings. However, an employee may request union involvement if they wish.

6. How can I find out if my absenteeism is excessive?

Management is responsible for monitoring absenteeism and discussing any attendance concerns that may arise with an employee. However, an employee may contact his or her supervisor to find out if there any concerns.

7. Other co-workers call in sick much more than I do. Why is my supervisor only meeting with me?

Information regarding an employee's specific attendance record and any actions being taken are confidential. Some employees may feel that they are being singled out when, in reality, conversations have occurred with others but this information is confidential.

8. What if an employee has had a good attendance record for years but is away on sick leave for a couple of weeks. Does this mean the supervisor will automatically begin having Absenteeism Management meetings with the employee?

No. Absenteeism Management is not an automatic process. It is important that management use discretion when applying this process and it is recognized there are many unique circumstances. Management may still have an informal discussion with the employee to see if a problem exists and to determine if he or she requires assistance due to the sudden change in absenteeism.

9. How is Absenteeism Management a supportive process when it may ultimately lead to termination of employment?

The objective of Absenteeism Management is to encourage and assist employees in achieving regular and consistent attendance at work. In cases of prolonged excessive absenteeism from work, where there is no likelihood of improvement, it may become evident that the employment relationship must end. The employment relationship may be legally terminated due to excessive absenteeism because all employees have a contractual obligation to attend work.

Termination of employment due to excessive absenteeism is used as a last resort and only after an employee has been given a reasonable amount of time to improve his or her absenteeism record.