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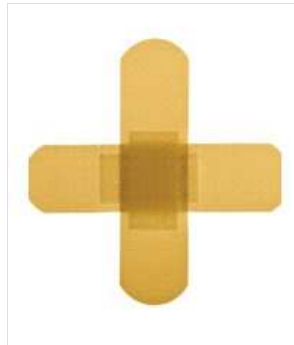
Career advice, insights & tips

How does the fit note affect the public sector? 19/04/2010

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As the general election draws near, the local government sector in particular is coming increasingly under fire by various news groups as part of their public sector smear campaign. The 'fit note versus absenteeism' issue plays a key role in this.



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How does the fit note work?

The creation of the newly introduced 'fit note' has fuelled speculation from many media sources that its introduction is targeted primarily towards the public sector. Conflicting surveys abound relating to private versus public sector absence rates, and depending whether you read the survey on the BBC, the Daily Mail or through the Trades Union Congress (TUC), the outcome will depend on the bias of the reporter.

While the fit note aims to support people back to work as soon as possible it is not intended to force unwell employees back before they are ready. Led by research which draws strong correlations between good health and work, the fit note requires employers to work directly with the sick employee to facilitate a successful return to work by offering solutions such as flexitime or implementing work station adaptations.

Just a myth?

Since the sick note to fit note debate, myths surrounding the public sector and local government in particular have become almost common knowledge. It is seen by many non-public sector staff as the government's way of targeting local government workers to combat absenteeism. So what are some of these myths? And what's the reality?

Myth: There is a high proportion of 'duvet days' among local government workers

The concept of 'duvet days' was thought up by August.One, a British PR company in the late 90s. It is a spontaneous day's paid leave for relaxation purposes in order to combat stress in the workplace. Many believe 'duvet days' are rife among local government workers who are suspected of 'pulling a sickie'. Yet the TUC, which defines sickies as a short-term absence, reports that 'sickies are a myth', after their survey revealed that 'public sector staff are less likely to take absences of one or two days'.

Myth: There is little work ethic among local government workers

While some local council employees suffer from low morale particularly in areas where cuts have led to overstretched and overworked staff, there is no evidence to suggest that there is a bad work ethic within the sector. In fact, according to our Jobsgopublic candidate survey conducted earlier this year, over 70% cited their reason for working in the sector as 'wanting to make a difference.'

Myth: public sector workers take more days off sick than any other sector

Aline Freestone, PA to the HR director at Ealing PCT, believes that the perception that public sector workers take more sick days than those in the private sector is due to the fact that presenteeism, although common in both sectors, is not 'expected' as much in the public sector. She says: "One of the reasons why public sector workers take more leave is because they (usually) don't have to subject themselves to presenteeism in order to keep their jobs. Sick leave is strictly monitored in most public sector organisations: we have to get a 'sick note' (now a 'fit note') if we are off for any longer than four days in a row, and there are back-to-work interviews and sickness absence reviews."

In addition, there is a high proportion of stress-related absence in the sector due to the nature of frontline services (teaching, emergency services, social work etc).

How is the fit note beneficial?

Is it helpful to compare sickness absence across the public and private sectors?

National health and safety policy adviser at Local Government Employers, Steven Sumner, does not believe it is: "Public sector organisations tend to be larger, and larger organisations appear to suffer more sickness absence than smaller organisations", he explains.

He points out that much of the public sector is made up of an older workforce with a large proportion of female employees with child (and other) dependants. He adds: "In my view, these issues mean that it is not a fair comparison. When a correction is made for these issues, the public sector compares favourably with the private sector."

Although the fit note will help combat absenteeism across all sectors, its purpose is primarily to support the long-term sick employee back to work. The new note includes the option: 'may be fit for work' which allows GPs to advise employers as to the patient's health-related limitations (rather than work-related adaptations - that is for the employer to discuss with the employee).

As such, Steven Sumner believes the new note will facilitate better communication between all parties involved: "It will encourage occupational health professionals, line managers, employees and GPs to communicate more effectively to decide the most beneficial way in managing an individual's return to work" he said.

In this way, it is hoped that the fit note will help to reduce absenteeism across all sectors. And while Sumner insists that absenteeism is not predominantly a public sector trait, he concedes that it is still an issue that needs managing. "Sickness absence is currently around 9.2 days, the lowest level in recent years, but councils should be working to reduce absenteeism levels still further," he says. "Councils need to have attendance policies in place which are enforced fairly, but they should also be looking at the 'organisation culture' and job design, as these factors are crucial in terms of employee engagement and satisfaction with their work."

Annie Makoff, marketing assistant, Jobs Go Public



Annie Makoff, marketing assistant for JobsGoPublic/JGP, the leading provider of talent management software and services to the public and not for profit sector. Annie is also a freelance journalist specialising in disability and special needs issues as well as public sector recruitment.

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