

ONE DAY'S ABSENTEEISM CAN COST YOU 3 DAYS' SALARY

The South African economy is losing about R12 billion every year due to absenteeism, the Independent Newspapers editorialised recently. It went on to say that the cost of absenteeism to a company equates not only to the person's salary for the day he or she is not working but up to three times that amount taking into consideration the productive time lost.

Lawrence Wordon, managing director of leading South African recruitment specialist PAG, says the numbers are probably much higher than that given a lack of data. This lack, he says, is due to the fact that detailed records of absenteeism are hardly kept by South African companies and that this is one of the reasons why absenteeism levels in the country are so high.

"There are two types of absenteeism," he says. "One is deliberate, which we affectionately referred to as 'bunkalitis' at school. The other is genuine absenteeism, meaning it's outside the control of the employee. Genuine absenteeism usually results from injury or sickness and there's not much a company can do to mitigate it," he says.

The biggest cause for genuine absenteeism is influenza and Wordon suggests that a company introduce a flu vaccination programme which will immunise staff members against the latest strains. He also says that wellness programmes at work have shown to reduce sickness at the workplace by, among others, encouraging a healthy lifestyle. "Nevertheless, people get sick. It's a fact of life."

Where companies can make a difference, however, is the high level of deliberate absenteeism and the maintenance of proper records can greatly expedite the process. "You need to get a sense of the size and cost of your absenteeism problem," he says. "Your records, which can be gathered from clock cards or attendance registers, should include such detail as the duration of the absence, trends (which days are most popular for 'sick' leave), costs of the sick leave absences and the type of illnesses that occur most frequently," he says.

"These records can then be used to develop a return-to-work interview forum in which the immediate supervisor can talk to the employee about his or her reasons for missing work. "This forum is not necessarily an inquisition: it is intended to show that yours is a caring company that looks after the welfare of its employees," he says. "However, guilty employees will be taken aback at the detail of your records and will probably think twice before bunking again."