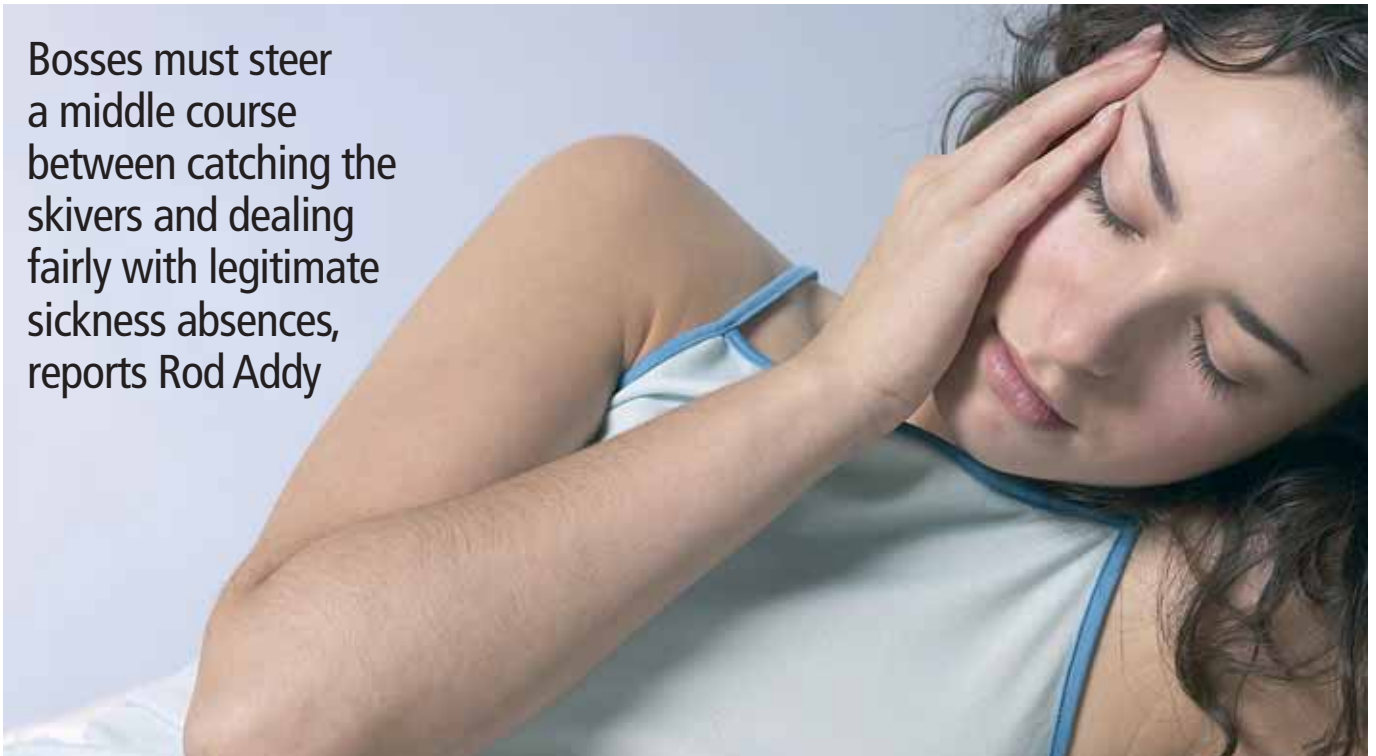


Bosses must steer a middle course between catching the skivers and dealing fairly with legitimate sickness absences, reports Rod Addy



# Fit answer for sick

**A** Google search using the term 'sickie' turns up a page on [www.thesite.org](http://www.thesite.org) suggesting tactics for pulling convincing time off work for sickness. It contains such gems as: "If you're tired and have a slight cold or a touch of hay fever, splash a little warm water on your forehead and pinch your cheeks for that fevered look, and go home with a dose of 'flu.'"

Bosses have to crack down on such inventive skiving, while covering themselves in an increasingly litigious society by giving genuinely sick workers all the help they need to return to work swiftly.

The food industry has a lot at stake. According to the latest statistics from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, employers in the food, drink and tobacco industries recorded the highest average absence rate in manufacturing and production – 4.1% of work time a year.

Absence management specialist Absencecare reckons the cost to a food or drink business with 500 employees and an average absence rate of 6% is about £1M. But, it claims, this rate could be halved, with commensurate savings.

Absencecare's work with east London gammon producer Bearfields, which has 200 employees, for example, has driven absence rates down from 6.4% to below 3%.

The process begins with accurate records. BUPA UK's online calculator, [www.costofabsence.com](http://www.costofabsence.com), launched at the end of last year, can help processors calculate how much they are losing in sick days and help them set targets. The Health & Safety Executive (HSE) also provides a Sickness Absence Recording Tool to collect, record and measure sickness absence data. Many specialists, such as Absencecare, provide similar facilities.

"Good absence management starts with good data – this underpins everything else you do," says Absencecare md Malene Nielsen. These records should be owned by the line manager and include information on cause of absence, expected return date, steps taken by the employee to get better and a log of the manager's actions. Tracking sick days can

**“Good absence management starts with good data – this underpins everything else you do”**

uncover obvious trends that could highlight the need for disciplinarys.

Once the data is in place, management policy must be addressed. "If policies are too lenient, too flexible or involve too much managerial discretion, the decision to discipline for short term absence may not be taken often enough," says Nielsen.

Establishing triggers for further action is helpful. Absencecare suggests three spells of absence in 12 months, two spells in three months or accumulated absence of nine days per year as useful guidelines.

Graham Johnson, operations manager for BUPA Wellness and specialist occupational health (OH) practitioner, says return to work interviews can help enormously to reduce sickness absence. "Many managers avoid this like the plague, but unless an employee knows that whenever he or she takes time off, it's being recorded, they will be more likely to abuse the system." Proper training can give managers greater confidence here.

Often these interviews can identify underlying legitimate reasons for taking time off that aren't sickness related and the company can take steps to address these, says Johnson. For example, staff may be having problems with child minders. "Good employers then have the opportunity to offer solutions,

## FIRMS HELP TO GIVE UNEMPLOYED A FRESH START

Employers from the food and drink industry are pitching in to entice people who have been unemployed for some time back to work as part of the government's local employer partnership scheme.

Companies that have already signed up include Arla Foods, Bakkavör Group, Britvic Soft Drinks, Cumbrian Seafoods, Food Partners and Premier Foods. The programme targets those who have been without a job for all kinds of reasons, from single parents to the disabled, and it is backed by Job Centre Plus.

In food manufacturing, this would mean prospective employees would be trained in food hygiene, health and safety and employability skills. In return, the employer provides an interview for the candidate and, if they are successful, three weeks' work.

The government pays the candidate's wages for those three weeks and Job Centre Plus takes care of all their training. It also screens them and gives them a list of exactly what the employer is looking for. Should the person be taken on for that period, they could be made a permanent employee if they prove themselves suitable to the role.

"The government recognises there are three million people in the UK not working and receiving benefits," says Jack Matthews, chief executive of food and drink sector skills council Improve. "This is helping them off benefits and back to work."

Cynics might reasonably argue that the prospects would surely be slight that those taken on ended up in gainful employment that was of benefit to the companies involved. Not so, says Matthews. He claims that roughly 40% of long-term unemployed who have agreed to participate in the scheme have ended up getting a permanent job. Marks & Spencer certainly found that to be the case when it launched its Marks and Start scheme, signing up 9,500 people over a three year period as part of the government initiative.

However, Matthews does admit that workers don't all stay with the company that takes them on initially. "They might decide they don't want to work for that butcher, but they do want to work for that baker," he says. Despite that, processors will get three weeks unpaid work from someone at the very least. They get ready-made employees with minimum hassle, risk and cost.

Matthews is keen to stress the other benefits of the government scheme for companies that decide to participate. For example, the initiative qualifies as one way of tackling the dearth of recruits to the industry, he says. "There hasn't been a great take-up from the food manufacturing sector, but when people find out what it involves, they are enthusiastic. It's such a neat way of solving the skills problem."



# staff

such as flexitime or an in-house carers league."

Short term absences of up to two weeks is one thing, but handling instances of longer term absence can be more tricky.

The HSE, which has case studies on its web site ([www.hse.gov.uk/food](http://www.hse.gov.uk/food)) to guide processors, claims the two most common instances of work-related ill health in the food industry are musculoskeletal injuries and mental health issues.

Often, managers do not intervene soon enough to determine all medical steps are being taken to help the person return to work, claims Nielsen. She says a person can often be given painkillers by his GP, but not seek further help. Two weeks down the line, they are no closer to returning to work. She also advocates a policy of intervention after two weeks, because if employers delay action much later, it is common to see just 20% of sick employees returning to work in the third week of absence.

Absencecare's work with meat packer Hilton Food Group, located in Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire, focused on scrapping an intervention policy based only on the discretion of its HR department.

Positive intervention strategies could also involve a company engaging a reputable OH professional. The Commercial Occupational Health Providers Association can be a useful

source of resources, especially pay-as-you-go OH services for smaller companies with less cash.

However, Nielsen cautions: "If they get a lot of medical jargon with unclear conclusions, line managers are going to be paralysed in decision-making regarding that employee. It's important that manufacturers know they can set demands for their OH partners."

Shrewd investment in treatment may also pay dividends, she adds: "Spending £150 on two sessions of physiotherapy for an employee could be better than waiting six to eight weeks for NHS treatment." Even if an injury is not specifically work-related, and therefore the employer is not strictly liable for medical bills, it may still be in its interests to pay. "You've got to be careful, but it may be wise for key staff

**“Spending £150 on physiotherapy for an employee could be better than waiting for NHS treatment”**

if it's going to slow down production," says Johnson.

In helping an employee back to work after a long absence, the employer must legally provide two weeks of temporary alternative duties initially. Sometimes employees do not want to return and so obtain an 'unfit for work' note from their GP.

"OH assessment and feedback is superior to a GP's verdict, since they have more knowledge of the employee's work and OH issues," says Nielsen. "Also, the GP is the patient's advocate, as most will admit. Despite this, a lot of companies still feel insecure about challenging GP notes."

Whether the issue is short term or long term absence, a consistently applied absence management policy is crucial, stresses Nielsen.

"Inconsistency, which can happen where managers change shift or role, for example, drives resentment." The policy should be reviewed regularly as workforce details change. Companies can also annoy unions by not consulting them on changes to these sorts of policies.

Nielsen insists if these steps are followed, there is no reason why most companies should not reduce their absence rates to around 3%, instead of the 4.1% sector average. So there'll be less room for excuses. **FM**