



Tackling Medium-Term Sickness Absence

A highly successful pilot programme aimed at reducing long-term sickness absence, delivered by Atos Healthcare, led Her Majesty's Prison Service to engage a second Atos Healthcare taskforce to address the more intricate issues of medium-term absence.



Background

Employee absence due to sickness had become a serious problem for Her Majesty's Prison Service (HMPS). A 2004 National Audit Office (NAO) Report¹ exposed the extent of the problem: based on a figure of £125 per lost day, absenteeism through sickness was costing HMPS £80 million every year in lost employee time.

In March 2005, we were commissioned by HMPS to develop and implement a pilot programme aimed at reducing that figure to a target of 11.5 days lost per employee, per annum. Working closely together, our taskforce and HMPS managers were able to save the prison service £1.49 million in unproductive time. Ongoing work continues to reduce that figure still further.

Encouraged by the impressive results of the long-term absence taskforce, HMPS then engaged us to develop and deliver a second programme, aimed at reducing the number of days lost through sickness among the 200 longest-running medium-term absence cases.

We worked in close collaboration with HMPS personnel to devise and deliver an absence reduction programme across the Prison Service Estate over a five month period, beginning in November 2005, covering 10 geographical areas, plus the HMPS High Security Estate.

The brief was to work alongside HMPS Area Personnel Advisors (APAs), HR departments and line managers to resolve difficult medium-term sickness absence cases in which progress had stalled or outcomes were inconclusive.

Our solution

We proposed that a programme of regular case conferences between our Occupational Health Advisors (OHAs) and HMPS managers should build on the strategies and techniques developed by the long-term absence taskforce.

The nature of medium-term absence is that employees tend to return to work in the short-term, only to take further sickness leave soon afterwards. Although it was clear from the outset that tackling medium-term absence was not going to be an easy task, our proposals were energetically adopted and implemented by HMPS managers.

The emphasis was on developing a faster turnaround of cases, based on a policy of intervention and rehabilitation, with regular reviews at two week intervals. This ensured constant monitoring until case closure was accomplished.

The programme centred on regular case conferences at area and establishment level. This was supported by case consultations with individuals on medium-term sickness leave, followed up with clinics run by Occupational Health Physicians (OHPs).

Particular attention was paid to HMPS establishments at Hindley, located in the North West, and Onley in the East Midlands, where medium-term absence figures were most acute.

Immediate results

Our sickness absence taskforce, together with HMPS HR departments, has been instrumental in reducing both long- and medium-term absence by more than 20,000 days in 2005/06, which is worth in excess of £2.5 million in non-cashable savings.

An analysis of the results showed that the return on investment for HMPS was a gain of £10 for every £1 spent on commissioning and implementing the programme.

As early as December 2005, close collaboration between HMPS managers and our personnel had achieved exceptional results at both HMP Hindley and HMP Onley:

- > At Hindley, the figure of 17.65 days absence per employee per annum had been cut to 13.66 – a significant reduction of 3.9 days
- > At Onley, sickness absence days fell dramatically from 24.12 days per employee per annum to 15.24 – an impressive reduction of 8.8 days.

¹The Management of Sickness Absence in the Prison Service, National Audit Office, Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General HC 533 Session 2003-2004: 19 May 2004.

“Atos Healthcare’s collaborative approach has once again yielded exceptional results. The medium-term absence problem was always going to be more difficult to address, but the success of the programme has demonstrated that with the right approach and focus, practical solutions can make a remarkable difference. The figures showing what we’ve achieved with Atos Healthcare’s help speak for themselves.”

Carolyn McColm, Area Personnel Advisor (North West) HMPS

Wider organisational benefits

In addition to substantial reductions in sickness absence levels and the achievement of major cost savings, our medium-term taskforce has instigated a number of other cultural and operational benefits for HMPS:

- > The resulting increase in manpower has enabled establishments to manage staff resources more effectively, and achieve greater productivity
- > The programme has facilitated closer working relationships between management and unions in understanding the mutual benefits of progressive occupational health intervention, and its role in delivering greater wellbeing for individuals and the organisation as a whole
- > The initiative has been welcomed by the majority of those employees involved, providing them with a way back to work and relieving the social and domestic stresses associated with medium-term sickness absence
- > A programme of on-site coaching for HMPS line managers, delivered by our OHAs, has developed skills in attendance management, stress awareness, workplace assessment and health surveillance, facilitating a policy of getting absent employees back to work faster.

The way ahead

While collaboration between our team and HMPS management continues to reduce long- and medium-term sickness absence figures, the success of the programmes delivered to date has encouraged further partnership between HMPS and Atos Healthcare.

A taskforce was appointed in December 2005 to develop a ‘Getting Staff Back To Work Faster’ programme, piloted in the East Midlands and tasked with addressing the problems of frequently absent employees.

Going forward

If you would like to find out more about Atos Healthcare, please call 020 7830 4931 or visit atoshealthcare.com





Modern healthcare solutions that follow you through your way of life

Atos Healthcare

atoshealthcare.com

Atos Healthcare™ is a trading name of Atos Origin IT Services UK Limited. Atos Healthcare™ – a trademark of the Atos Origin Group. June 2007
1451-0607