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# @work

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## Integrated Absence Management

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# Managing Leave During a Pandemic

Many employers have reported that 2020 saw their lowest leave levels in decades. Some hypothesize this was because so little travel was allowed. Others believe that U.S. workers may not have taken less leave, just reported it less. An employee working from home may not have had to report leave as it was not “seen” by supervisors. No matter the reason, all would agree 2020 was an anomaly year, and the need for leave management is expected to increase post-pandemic.

While many employers are considering making permanent changes regarding remote work and hybrid work environments, most employers should prepare for pre-pandemic leave levels to resurface. How, then, should human resource departments manage leave as the world comes out of the pandemic?

Think about implementing proactive leave programs that fit your organization’s specific leave challenges. What do you know about your leave issues? Before any employer can address leave, it has to be honest with itself about the impact of the situation.

The first question to ask is “what do our leave levels cost us?” Many organizations don’t have a clue. Start researching the cost of your leave: payroll costs, staffing for additional substitute workers to cover for employees out on leave, lost production costs, and any other cost associated with leave. Knowing

your numbers will help you identify if this issue is worth your time and investment. Then establish your goals, including how to quantify the amount of leave you want to reduce.

If leave is a challenge in your organization, then engage in three activities to reduce unnecessary leave now:

### **1) Communicate with Employees in Your Organization**

All employees need to know the challenge you are working to fix. Share your goals for reduction. Explain that the organization wants to reduce unnecessary leave to make necessary leave available to employees under the current (or desired) staffing levels.

### **2) Identify “High Users” and Begin with Them.**

For example, start the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) interactive process with the top 5% of leave users — either because they are abusing leave or using so much due to a legitimate disability. By addressing this group using the highest percentage of leave, they will learn and better understand your ADA leave process and options to help them stay at work. Moreover, this also creates overall company awareness that you are managing leave. While you won’t communicate that you are engaging with your top 5% of leave users, word will generally spread of what you

are doing!

### **3) Talk with All Intermittent FMLA Leave Users as They Start Intermittent Leave**

You would be surprised what many employees think intermittent leave allows them to do. Often engaging in this conversation early helps the organization work with the employee in finding accommodations that can better support both the individual employee and the organization.

Finally, remember why you are doing this work. The goal is for full-time employees to work full-time with regular and reliable attendance. The organization is doing this work to honor the employees who come to work when they are well and to make sure employees who are missing when not sick know you see their absences.

Leave management is not about firing people. It is about helping employees who are too disabled to work full-time to consider alternative options and reminding those who may be abusing leave that they matter and you see their misuse. The goal is improved attendance and employment longevity.