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WHEN CAN WE MANAGE LEAVE AGAIN? DEVELOPING YOUR ADA LEAVE MANAGEMENT PROGRAM IN AN (ALMOST)

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In 2020, when many employers sent employees home in droves to work remotely, leave numbers were at record lows. Today, leave requests are increasing to pre-COVID levels. Employers are also seeing an increase in the number of job accommodation requests as organizations announce plans to return employees to office environments. And with a tumultuous start to 2022, employers are preparing for sustained high levels of leave — due to different COVID variants and a potential for more Americans to identify as disabled.[1]

While your organization may still be in survival mode dealing with COVID-related absences, it is time to start thinking about implementing a strategic leave management plan to ensure the organization can accommodate absences and ensure success. Understanding key components of this type of plan is vital. Here are five areas you can work on now:

1. Identify Problems

Get data to help you understand the real cost of leave usage in your organization. Simply put, if you don't understand your problem, you can't address it. Collect the direct and indirect costs of leave, including actual payroll costs for all sick leave used, substitute costs, administrative costs for person(s) to manage leaves and substitutes if you use them to fill in gaps, and overtime costs to cover for absences. Also, examine workers' compensation leave. Can you track lost days and injury rates to see if there is a reduction over time and with reduced overall leave? In addition to costs, professionals need to understand trends that drive absences. Are there more mental health-related leaves? Are surgeries that were postponed due to COVID-19-related fears being scheduled? This information should be collected and used as part of your strategic leave management plan.

2. Create a Culture that Supports Necessary Leaves

Implement rules about truly being "off" when on needed leave. For example, establish and communicate expectations that employees will not check emails or phone messages while they are out on leave. This is part of building a healthy, balanced workgroup. If employees are working while they're on leave, research why and address the issue to ensure that expectations are clear, and that employees feel supported while they're out.

3. Meet with Employees Who Take Intermittent FMLA Leave

Commit to meeting with any person taking intermittent leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) to ensure all parties understand the law's purpose and rules. Document your discussion and ideas for how you can support the employee and department to manage work demands related to intermittent FMLA leave.

4. Accommodate Mental Health Needs

Most employers have a workforce with more mental health support needs due to the pandemic. Promote your employee assistance program and other services through pamphlets and trainings for your employees.

5. Assess Unique Needs and Act Early

Start the Americans with Disabilities Act interactive process for employees who take leave that is not covered by the FMLA. Gather data on total leave needs to determine if the leave is medically needed, if there are alternatives, and if the level of leave is reasonable.

While we often focus on how levels of leave affect the bottom line of an organization, the effects of all leaves are wide reaching. High levels of leave affect an organization's morale, which is why leave management is vital to ensure the fiscal and cultural health of the organization.

REFERENCES

1. CDC Updates, Expands List of People at Risk of Severe COVID-19 Illness. June 25, 2020. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/media/ releases/2020/p0625-update-expands-covid-19.html