

Work Space

All present but not all there

Vigilance may be required to prevent your workers losing motivation during these testing times, writes **Hannah Tattersall.**

A worker in the equipment finance industry had been in his job about six months when the financial crisis struck. He was so stressed about losing his job and not being able to support his children that a small cold turned into pneumonia. But he continued to work. He had to. It's what employees do in uncertain times — they work harder and longer, because they worry if they don't show their face at work, they'll lose their job.

"God save you if you fall sick on a Monday," says an employee in financial services. "Because a lot of managers just won't believe that you're sick."

"You're always expected to perform," he says, and cites the "wave of fear" that can exist in large banking organisations.

But there are employees out there who are so stressed by the financial crisis they *can't* work. Like the young trader who is so stressed, he's been seeing his doctor for shots of valium to help him sleep at night. Or the owner of a number of mines in Western Australia who has found it difficult to get out of bed in the morning and has been seeing a

doctor for anxiety and depression. Despite the belief that it pays to show your face, as stocks plummet organisations can expect staff absenteeism to rise.

Research by Direct Health Solutions (DHS) has found that during times of economic crisis, workers actually take more time off work than they usually would.

"Across the economy in times of contraction and downsizing... increasingly what we see is increased absenteeism levels," says the author of the research and chief executive Paul Dundon.

"If the contraction continues we would expect absenteeism rates to rise fairly significantly over the next 12 to 24 months. Some of the factors relating to that are obviously greater levels of stress at work."

Certainly the main reasons for increased levels of sick leave were stress, anxiety and depression due to larger workloads and concerns about job retention.

The 2008 Absence Management Survey of 184 respondents was taken from the 12-month period up until March 31, 2008. The bulk of the respondents worked in banking, finance and insurance, and the public sector. Sixty-two per cent of those surveyed thought workplace stress levels were on the rise. Workplace absenteeism was found to have risen 20 per cent on the previous year, and Dundon says the results provide a good prediction of what's likely to happen over the next 12 months.



Photo-illustration: KARL HILZINGER

"We've been coming through some really good economic times and still only 20 per cent of employers are saying absenteeism is falling, so we're going to see a lot of people who say it remains static, or [will] rise," he says.

"We are going to see more sick leave in Australia without a doubt."

Senior program manager and psychologist for beyondblue, Clare Shann, says warning signs that someone is depressed in the workplace include finding it difficult to concentrate, turning up late to work, feeling emotional and tearful, frustration with tasks and other people, feeling stressed and using alcohol to cope with stressful events.

Shann says there has been an increase in the number of calls to beyondblue in recent months, that are directly related to anxiety about the financial crisis. There has been a 25.1 per cent increase in the number of calls taken between June and July 2007 and the same period this year.

"Given the events that are going on in Australia and globally, we have noticed more people are mentioning financial pressures in the workplace. Anecdotally we're hearing that it's an issue," says Shann.

Shann says while depression can impact upon levels of absenteeism, it can also affect what is referred to as presenteeism, where somebody does turn up to work, but they don't perform as well as they normally would. "They are there, but they are not as productive as they usually are."

"The cost to the economy and the organisation for lost productivity is more than the cost of absenteeism," she says.

The research found that on average Australians take 8.62 days of sick or personal leave each year, at a cost to the economy of about \$26.6 billion per annum.

The average number of sick days taken globally is six days, according to Dundon, who says it is generally lower in large corporations.

DHS found call centres have the highest number of sick leave days — it is not uncommon for an employee to take 18 days of leave a year even if they're paid for fewer. For a large organisation like Telstra, this can amount to a loss of \$65 million to the company, says Dundon.

He says sometimes the reason for sick leave in uncertain times is people feeling wary about changing jobs. They are more likely to stay unhappy in their current job, rather than leave and risk not finding a new, more suitable one straight away. So they stay longer, but that may not be good for their physical and mental health.

"So they act that out, not by jumping ship, but by taking more time off work," he says.

Professor Chris Jackson from the School of Management at the University of NSW says when people think things are going badly for an organisation, "they feel demoralised and give up".

"They start thinking, 'there's no point, my contribution is not valued

... I don't have to come to work as no one's monitoring what I'm doing'," he says.

Simon Moss, a psychology lecturer in the faculty of medicine at Monash University, has done research into the psychological state of stressed managers during the world financial crisis. Moss says efficiency and productivity will drop as staff become much less engaged in what they do, and symptoms of disillusionment, depression and burn-out are not uncommon.

"Generally speaking, when people are very stressed about the organisation they are more likely to get out of bed almost out of terror and fear but that tends not to occur during these times."

Moss found that stressed managers often erred during times of hardship by becoming overly pessimistic. They began to feel vulnerable about their own jobs.

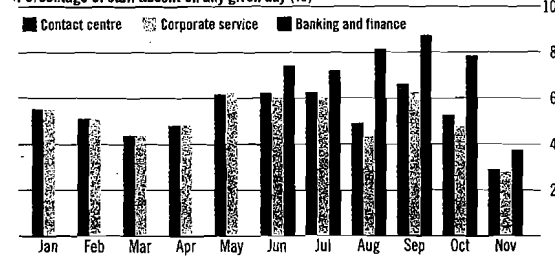
The DHS study found that in the past 12 months, 88 per cent of organisations had introduced initiatives to support employee well-being. But they're not working, says Dundon. "The approach they are taking is not quite right. There needs to be a complete radical rethink in how organisations are tackling this issue."

He says the first step to reducing absenteeism lies in organisations taking responsibility for their employees' health status.

"That's things like providing better support to employees for minor illnesses, because currently they don't provide any."

Sickie

Percentage of staff absent on any given day (%)



SOURCE: 2008 ABSENCE MANAGEMENT SURVEY REPORT