## 2 Measuring, Reporting and Costing Absence

## CONTENTS

### 2.1 Why the concern about absence?

### 2.2 The purpose of measuring absence

2.3 How to collect absence data
2.4 How to record absence
2.4.1 Recording the cause of absence
2.4.2 Recording hours or days
2.4.3 Data protection
2.5 How to analyse and report absence data
2.5.1 Absence rate
2.5.2 Absence frequency
2.5.3 Absence duration
2.5.4 The Bradford Factor
2.5.5 Terminology and assumptions in absence reporting
2.5.6 Measure of certified and non-certified absence

### 2.6 Costing absence

2.7 Presentation of absence data
2.7.1 Presenting data to managers
2.7.2 Feedback to employees
2.7.3 Benchmarking
2.8 Applications and services for measuring absence
2.9 Summary
2.10 Reference sources

### 2.1 Why the concern about absence?

Absence is a major concern to business, government and employees and their families. The CIPD (2006a) estimates that on average sickness absence costs employers $£ 598$ per employee every year, with an average of eight working days lost for every member of staff per year. The costs of absence to organisations have also been calculated to be between 2 and 16\% of annual salary costs for large employers in the UK (Bevan and Hayday, 2001), and estimated at a total cost to UK business of around $£ 13.4$ billion in 2006 (CBI, 2007). For this reason, measures to minimise absence represent a priority for potential cost reduction through improved attendance. Although a certain amount of absence is inevitable, it is possible to take action to reduce some types of absence, such as time off for health problems caused or made worse by work, or the time taken to return to work following absence.

Absence is a complex, multi-causal event. Managing it requires consideration of all the many possible causes in order to develop appropriate and targeted strategies, interventions and policies. The measurement of absence is the vital first step to understanding its extent, pattern and causes. This chapter describes the key issues and stages involved in measuring absence, including how to collect, record and report absence data, and how to calculate the costs of absence.

### 2.2 The purpose of measuring absence

In order to manage absence effectively it is essential to have accurate, timely and accessible information. Research suggests that appropriate information about absence is one of the major factors in successfully tackling sickness absence (cited in Seccombe, 1995). If sufficient and accurate information is kept, an organisation can use it to:

- understand the underlying causes of absence by examining trends and patterns in absence-taking
- prioritise action towards those employees, teams or departments that have the highest levels of absence
- provide action triggers based on the absence history of individual employees
- feed absence statistics back to employees and managers
- calculate an estimate of the benefits of absence management strategies and other interventions designed to reduce absence (eg stress management interventions)
- estimate the costs of absence to the organisation
- put together absence statistics for external benchmarking against other organisations.

However, it seems that many organisations fail to measure absence appropriately. This means that they cannot reliably use their data to inform absence management practice in the ways described above. For absence data to be sufficiently reliable and functional, organisations must:

- collect accurate absence information - the organisation must become aware of each real absence event, and collect as much accurate information about it as possible
- record that data in a usable format - a trace of each piece of information about each absence event is stored in the form of electronic data; this data should be sufficiently rich in detail for an accurate representation of each event to be rebuilt from the pieces of data without assumptions having to be made
- analyse the data - monitoring trends and patterns across time, departments and individuals, summarising absence levels, and costing absence
- report the analysis - presenting the absence data in a usable form to managers, OH and HR professionals.


### 2.3 How to collect absence data

The first requirement of an absence data system is for the organisation to know about each absence event that happens. If the absence data collected does not accurately describe the real amount of absence taken, the data cannot be reliably used in monitoring, costing and managing it. The system for gathering absence data must be thorough and consistently applied to avoid systematic under- or over-reporting of absence. Problems with the collection of absence data that lead to inaccuracies include:

- employees failing to report their absence
- line managers failing to send absence forms to Personnel/HR
- line managers failing to 'close' an employee's absence (ie they report the start of a period of absence but not its end).

To avoid these problems, the procedures that organisations use to collect absence data should be straightforward, rigorous, and reliably followed by all parties involved (ie the absent employee, the line manager, the Personnel/HR staff receiving and recording the data). A written absence management policy should set out the absence notification procedures for both employees and line managers (see Chapter4, Attendance management) and this should be communicated clearly to all employees. Following the correct procedures for reporting absence should become a routine and accepted part of organisational life.

### 2.4 How to record absence

As well as ensuring that a record of each absence is collected, it is important to consider what form that information takes. There are a variety of different ways to record information about employees' absences from work, but the main aim here is to ensure that sufficiently detailed information is gathered to enable the organisation to analyse trends, patterns and causes of absence from the data. However, because many of the systems used for recording absence data were initially designed to provide information for payroll purposes, organisations often just collect the most basic information on absence, such as the dates and length of absence (Ritchie, Cowie,

## Absence and Attendance

Graham, Hutchison, Mulholland, Melrose and Pilkington, 2005). More detailed information than this is required if the organisation is to make full use of its data and effectively manage absence.

Written absence forms are the usual method for collecting the information about an employee's absence, so careful consideration must be given to how these forms are designed to collect the necessary information. At a minimum, the absence form should provide a record of:

- name, job title or level, department, age, gender
- date of the first day of absence
- expected return date
- cause of absence (see below)
- whether the cause is potentially work-related
- whether the absence was self- or medically-certificated.

Additional information which should be collected after the initial absence form includes:

- date of the last day of absence
- number of working hours/days absent (see below)
- cause of absence, ascertained from return-to-work meetings (see below).

The line manager should have responsibility for completing absence forms and submitting them to HR or Personnel departments for central processing and analysis. Line managers should ensure that they complete the forms in a careful but uniform way so the data collected is both consistent and reliable. The forms must therefore be relatively straightforward to use, and line managers should receive some training in how to complete them. An example of an absence reporting form is shown in Table 2.1.

The related document, an example of an absence recording form, can be downloaded from www.cipd.co.uk/wbp

Table 2.1: Example of an absence recording form

| Employee ID |  |
| :--- | :--- |
| Employee name |  |
| Department |  |
| Job title |  |
| Age |  |
| Gender |  |
|  |  |
| Start time and date of absence |  |
| Expected return date |  |


| Employee ID |  |
| :--- | :--- |
| Actual return time and date |  |
| Actual hours absent |  |
|  | insert reason code a |
| Reason for absence | insert sickness code b |
| Cause of sickness absence | yes/no |
| Self-certificated? | yes/no |
| Medically-certificated? | yes/no |
| Return-to-work interview completed? | yes/no/don't know |
| Work-related cause? | yes/no |
| Referral to Occupational Health? |  |
| Additional notes from <br> return-to-work interview | yes/no |
| Record complete? | a Example codes for reason for absence: 1 = paid holiday, $2=$ doctor's appointment, $3=$ <br> sickness absence, etc |
| b Example codes for cause of sickness absence: 1 = cold, cough, flu, 2 = back problems, <br> $3=$ headache, migraine, etc |  |

In addition, a new sickness absence recording tool (SART) has recently been developed for the HSE, especially aimed at SMEs. More information about SART can be found at the HSE website (HSE, 2007) or SART website (IOM, 2007). ACAS also provides an example absence recording form on its website (ACAS, 2007).

### 2.4.1 Recording the cause of absence

A survey of over 350 organisations found that over one quarter did not record information on the causes of sickness absence (Ritchie et al, 2005). And when organisations do record such information, the vast majority of them use free text rather than a coding system. This limits the usability of the data for analysis of the causes of absence.

There are a variety of different classification and coding systems available which allow analysis of the frequency of different causes of absence and their distribution throughout the organisation. These systems have been reviewed by Ritchie et al (2005), and used to develop a comprehensive coding structure for absence. Using this system absence can be divided into sickness absence and non-sickness absence. There are 24 different categories concerning the cause of sickness absence, and nine categories for non-sickness absence (see Table 2.2).

The related document, a coding system for absence, can be downloaded from www.cipd.co.uk/wbp

## Absence and Attendance

Table 2.2: A coding system for the causes of absence

| Cause of sickness absence | Cause of non-sickness absence |
| :--- | :--- |
| A1 anxiety, stress, depression, other psycho- <br> logical ilnesses | B1 dental appointment |
| A2 back problems | B2 doctor's appointment |
| A3 other musculo-skeletal problems | B3 other medical appointment |
| A4 cold, cough, flu | B4 jury service |
| A5 asthma | B5 compassionate leave |
| A6 chest and respiratory problems | B6 paid holiday |
| A7 headache/migraine | B7 unpaid holiday |
| A8 benign and malignant tumours | B8 maternity/paternity leave |
| A9 blood disorders | B9 other non-medical |
| A10 heart, cardiac, circulatory problems |  |
| A11 burns, poisoning, frostbite, hypothermia |  |
| A12 ear, nose, throat, dental or oral problems |  |
| A13 eye problems |  |
| A14 endocrine/glandular problems |  |
| A15 gastrointestinal problems |  |
| A16 genitourinary and gynaecological disorders |  |
| A17 infectious diseases |  |
| A18 injury, fracture |  |
| A19 nervous system disorders |  |
| A20 pregnancy-related disorders |  |
| A21 skin disorders |  |
| A22 substance abuse |  |
| A23 other known cause |  |
| A24 unknown cause |  |

Source: (adapted from) Ritchie et al (2005); reproduced under the terms of the Click-Use licence

If information on the cause of absence as well as grouping information such as the employee level or department is recorded, it is possible to start doing a more sophisticated analysis of the patterns and causes of absence across the organisation as a whole as well as by different departments, job functions, shifts, etc.

On the initial record of absence, the line manager would normally write in the cause of absence based on the information provided by the employee when he or she first calls in to report the absence. Subsequently, this data may have to be altered or supplemented with information on any different cause of absence that emerges from the return-to-work interview, on a medical certificate from the employee's GP, or following examination by an occupational health professional.

### 2.4.2 Recording hours or days

When setting up the system, the decision will have to be made whether to record absences in terms of hours or days. Many organisations calculate the days lost due to absence through using the recorded start date and end date of each period of absence. This can lead to the problem of how to record part-day absences - excluding them and therefore underestimating absence, or including them as a full day's absence each and overestimating absence (Seccombe, 1995). Another problem can occur when calculating the absence rates for part-time staff. For part-timers' absence to be measured in days instead of hours can also lead to overestimating absence levels.

The decision as to whether to record days or hours must be determined by the organisation's needs. However, some of the pros and cons of using days rather than hours are:

## Pros:

- compatibility with existing systems
- manager familiarity with completing report forms and receiving absence summaries in days format
- No requirement to establish the precise time an absence started or ended.


## Cons:

- over- or under-estimation of part-day absences
- over-estimation of the absence rates of part-time staff.


### 2.4.3 Data protection

Organisations have a legal requirement to keep information on absence for statutory sick pay purposes (eg duration of absence). But in order to record more detailed information about any accident, illness or health condition responsible for the absence, organisations need employees' express consent because details of employees' health are categorised as 'sensitive personal data' under the Data Protection Act 1998 (Hutchison, Ritchie and Cowie, 2006). This can be achieved by setting out the absence recording policy in the employment contract. Because the legal requirements under the Data Protection Act are more onerous in relation to health information than for absence information, separate storage of these two sets of data may help prevent a breach of the Data Protection Act (EEF, 2004).

Employees should also have access to the collected data, and should know what information is recorded, what it is used for (eg administering statutory sick pay, monitoring absence levels, developing Occupational Health interventions) and who can have access to it. This information can be shared with employees at induction and it could also be included on self-certification forms and included in the organisation's absence policy (EEF, 2004). Absence data should be presented in a way that protects the anonymity of individual employees. Records which identify individual employees should be accessible only to those who legitimately need to see them.

Although employers have legitimate reasons for collecting and analysing absence and health information, the Data Protection Act 1998 and the Employment Practices Data Protection Code (ICO, 2007a) place clear obligations on employers in relation to how

## Absence and Attendance

they use and keep absence and health records. Organisations should review their record-keeping procedures to ensure that their records are maintained and processed in accordance with the legal requirements of the Data Protection Act. The Information Commissioner's Office has a checklist to help with compliance with the Data Protection Act (ICO, 2007b). Questions on the checklist include:

- Do I really need this information about an individual? Do I know what I'm going to use it for?
- Do the people whose information I hold know that I've got it, and are they likely to understand what it will be used for?
- Am I satisfied the information is being held securely, whether it's on paper or on computer?
- Is access to personal information limited to those with a strict need to know?
- Do I delete or destroy personal information as soon as I have no more need for it?
- Have I trained my staff in their duties and responsibilities under the Data Protection Act, and are they putting them into practice?


### 2.5 How to analyse and report absence data

Once the data has been collected and recorded, organisations need to use it to generate reports that will provide HR, OH and different management levels with information to help them manage absence effectively. These reports will provide summaries of the absence data, in the form of figures and graphs, and provide overall statistics for the whole organisation as well as breakdowns by departments, job function, self-certified and medically-certified absences, work-related absences, and different causes of absence, amongst others. A number of commonly-used methods of reporting absence data are described below.

### 2.5.1 Absence rate

The absence rate or time lost rate is the most commonly-used measure of absence (Seccombe, 1995). It expresses the percentage of contracted working time available (in days or hours) that has been lost due to absence:
$\frac{\text { Total absence (hours or days) during a given period }}{\text { Total contracted time (hours or days) in that period }} \times 100$

The related document, an absence rate calculator, can be downloaded from www.cipd.co.uk/wbp

It can be calculated separately for individual departments or groups of employees to reveal particular absence problems. Although the measure of absence rate gives a simple picture of the proportion of time that staff are absent, it gives no information on whether that absence is due to a large number of short-term absences or a few
long-term absences. To more fully understand the nature of absence within an organisation it is necessary also to examine the frequency and duration of absences.

## EXAMPLE: CALCULATING THE ABSENCE RATE

If a department has 14 staff each contracted to work 37 hours per week, over a four-week period they would have a total contracted time of 2,072 hours. If this group of employees had a total absence of 126 hours, their absence rate would be calculated as:

$$
\frac{126}{2072} \times 100=6.08 \%
$$

### 2.5.2 Absence frequency

This method of reporting absence data gives the average number of absence events per employee as a percentage. It measures the spread of absence across employees and provides a better indicator of short-term absence than the absence rate (Seccombe, 1995). It is calculated as:

Number of absence events
Number of employees

The related document, an absence rate frequency calculator, can be downloaded from www.cipd.co.uk/wbp

It does not give any indication of the length of each absence period or the actual time lost, and therefore tends to discount long-term absence. Equal weighting is given to absences of one day and one month, for example.

An individual frequency rate can also be calculated by counting the number of employees who take at least one spell of absence in the period, rather than the total number of spells of absence:

Number of employees with one or more absence event
Number of employees

The related document, an absence rate frequency calculator (individual), can be downloaded from www.cipd.co.uk/wbp

## Absence and Attendance

## EXAMPLE: CALCULATING ABSENCE FREOUENCY

During a period of one month an organisation employs, on average, 50 workers, and during this time there are a total of 10 spells of absence, so the absence frequency rate is:

$$
\frac{10}{50} \times 100=20 \%
$$

If we know that 42 of the employees had no absence at all during that period, the individual absence frequency is:

$$
\frac{8}{50} \times 100=16 \%
$$

### 2.5.3 Absence duration

Measures of absence duration provide a better indication of the contribution of long-term absences to the organisation's absence figures. The average duration of each absence spell can be calculated as:

Total duration of absence spells ending during the specified period
Number of absence spells ending during the period

Because some of the absences taken during a given period will be on-going, and not yet complete, their duration will be unknown and therefore they will not be counted within this calculation. This can lead to reports of absence duration underestimating the true amount of absence in a given period. To avoid this, on-going absences can be temporarily 'closed' to allow for inclusion in the calculation.

### 2.5.4 The Bradford Factor

The Bradford Factor - so called first during the 1980s because of its supposed connection with Bradford University School of Management - is a measure which combines absence frequency and duration measures to identify an employee's irregularity of attendance. It is a way of illustrating how frequent short-term absences may cause more disruption in organisations than occasional long-term absences: the higher the 'score', the worse the disruption. It is calculated using the formula:
$\mathbf{S} \times \mathbf{S} \times \mathbf{D}$
where
$\mathbf{S}$ is the number of spells of absence of an individual over a given period; and
D is the total number of days of absence of the individual over the same period.

It is increasingly used by organisations to identify employees with frequent short-term absence which may require further investigation. Individuals' Bradford scores are monitored and when a certain score (or trigger point) is reached, a process of absence reviews and further action from HR and line managers is set in motion (see Chapter 4 for more detail on how triggers are used to manage absence). However, Bradford scores should not form the sole basis for important decisions such as disciplinary action. Further investigation and consideration of each individual case is a vital companion to the use of Bradford scores.

The related document, a Bradford Factor calculator, can be downloaded from www.cipd.co.uk/wbp

## EXAMPLE: CALCULATING BRADFORD SCORES

Four employees ( $a, b, c$ and d) have the same absence duration of 10 days. However, their pattern of absence is very different - as their Bradford scores highlight through the weighting given to frequent short-term absence.
(a) One absence of 10 days

Bradford score $=1 \times 1 \times 10=10$ points
(b) Three absences of one, three and then six days

Bradford score $=3 \times 3 \times 10=90$ points
(c) Five absences of two days each

Bradford score $=5 \times 5 \times 10=250$ points
(d) Ten absences of one day each

Bradford score $=10 \times 10 \times 10=1,000$ points

The Bradford score can also be used in conjunction with other measures of absence to help interpret the data. For example, a low Bradford score and a high absence rate points to a small number of employees with long-term absence, whereas a high Bradford score and a low absence rate suggests that there is a small number of employees with frequent short-term absences (Seccombe, 1995).

It is important that Bradford scores are not used in isolation. Because they focus purely on short-term absence, they can easily divert attention from problems of long-term absence. For many managers, reducing persistent short-term absence is the primary aim since dealing successfully with it minimises the disruption such absence causes and is in general also relatively straightforward to manage through punitive measures, giving them an easy victory. Long-term absence, on the other hand, can often require more consideration, effort and time to reduce. All the same, long-term absence is the more costly form of absence if it is not managed properly, accounting for up to $70 \%$ of the costs of absence (Bevan, 2003), and should not be ignored by focusing solely on Bradford scores and short-term absence.

Another concern about using Bradford scores is that they are often applied with the assumption that all short-term frequent absence is non-genuine and due to a lack of motivation or commitment rather than due to sickness or some other inability to work. This assumption can be wrong and dangerous because, where it is mistakenly applied, Absence and Attendance
it can actually lead to negative feelings and lack of motivation and commitment in employees. For example, consider an employee who suffers from migraines which lead him or her to take a series of one-day absences during the year, and whose Bradford score triggers the organisation's absence review procedures. If these absence reviews are conducted with the initial assumption that these absences are not legitimate, the employee may very well feel unfairly judged by the organisation and subsequently become disengaged. It is important therefore to suspend judgements and beware of assumptions when using Bradford scores.

On the positive side, there is some evidence that the use of Bradford scores can act as a deterrent to employees who do take absence for non-genuine reasons. A number of organisations have reported that absence is reduced when Bradford scores are first introduced, which may be due to the use of this system as a visible warning to employees (IDS, 2007).

### 2.5.5 Terminology and assumptions in absence reporting

When reporting absence data, it is important to avoid making assumptions about the nature of absence which the data does not support, as highlighted above. If we are to use absence data to help manage absence more effectively, the language and terminology used in absence reports should be objective and judgement-free. However, some of the ways in which absence measures have been used and the terminology applied to them have been based on assumptions about what these measures represent.

The term 'voluntary absence' has often been used to refer to an absence from work that is judged unnecessary and avoidable, and that is thought to be under the individual's control, having some attitudinal or motivational cause. It has usually been operationalised by measures of absence frequency. In contrast, absence that is thought to be justified and unavoidable, with some tangible cause such as illness or other events beyond the individual's control, has often been labelled 'involuntary absence'. This has tended to be measured using a 'time lost' or absence duration index.

The use of categorisations such as 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' is largely reliant on the personal attributions of the individual using the data rather than a definitive characteristic of the data itself. It is only through the collection and reporting of data on the cause of absence that any such judgements can be based. Frequency and duration measures of absence alone are therefore not particularly informative. They capture only a subset of the basic information available. Additional information is required, preferably by including data about the cause of absence as collected through a coding system of different causes. But where this level of detail is not available it may be possible to use additional data concerning whether an absence is accompanied by medical certification.

### 2.5.6 Measure of certificated and non-certificated absence

In recent years, because of the criticisms surrounding duration and frequency measures, absence research has increasingly examined certificated and non-certificated absence (eg Hensing et al, 1998; Kivimäki, Vahtera, Thomson, Griffiths, Cox and Pentti, 1997; Marmot, Shipley and Rose, 1984). These measures are more informative because they indicate (i) the total time lost, (ii) the relative length of absence spells (non-certified absences are shorter spells, whereas certificated absences are longer spells), and (iii) when illness is a causal factor in the absence (certificated absences are validated by a physician). Furthermore, the distinction between the two measures is
based on an objective characteristic from the raw data set (ie the presence of a physician's certificate in support of an illness) rather than a personal attribution. Certificated absences tend to represent longer periods of absence related to illness, whereas non-certificated absences reflect shorter periods of absence that may be related to milder illness or other factors (such as lack of motivation or domestic crises). These two measures potentially offer a more informative and objective source of data than absence frequency and duration.

### 2.6 Costing absence

By calculating the costs of absence, an organisation can prioritise its absence management interventions to focus on reducing the most expensive forms of absence. Even if average absence levels in an organisation are low, the costs of absence may be high, especially if it is predominately long-term absence. An organisation can also calculate the benefits of expenditure on absence management interventions. These calculations can be important for 'making the case' to persuade management that it is worthwhile to invest time and resources on managing absence. Furthermore, communicating the costs of absence to employees can underline the importance of attendance to the organisation and may have an impact on the employees' own attendance behaviour.

However, it seems that few organisations actually know how much absence costs them. The Work Foundation (Bevan, 2003) estimates that $43 \%$ of UK employers calculate the cost of absence, whereas the CBI reports that only $25 \%$ do so. The main reasons given by organisations for not costing absence are that it is too time-consuming, that the organisation has either no personnel records or inaccurate records, or that absence is not a problem so it is not worthwhile.

Evidence from research by Bevan and Hayday (2001) suggests that those organisations who do engage in efforts to cost absence underestimate them seriously. This implies that most organisations are making decisions on how to manage absence without a full understanding of the costs and possible benefits of expenditure on managing absence more effectively.

Although the direct costs of absence such as basic salary expenditure may be relatively easy to calculate, the indirect and absence management costs are more difficult to quantify and are not dealt with comprehensively by organisations. A checklist devised by the Institute for Employment Studies for the purposes of costing absence based on these different types of cost is reproduced in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3: Checklist for calculating the costs of absence

| Direct costs | Indirect costs | Absence management <br> costs |
| :--- | :--- | :--- |
|  |  |  |
| Salary costs: | Internal replacement <br> worker: | Line manager costs: |
| annual salary | overtime | arranging cover |

## Absence and Attendance



Source: Bevan and Hayday (2001); reproduced with permission from the Institute for Employment Studies

In addition, Seccombe (1995) lists other less identifiable costs which can be attributed to absence, including:

- lost production or service provision
- interrupted work flow
- loss of customers
- lower productivity from temporary employees and returning employees
- added costs of meeting slipped deadlines
- reduced employee morale.

The related document, a cost of absence calculator, can be downloaded from www.cipd.co.uk/wbp

### 2.7 Presentation of absence data

### 2.7.1 Presenting data to managers


#### Abstract

Absence data must be clearly presented to allow managers to identify problem areas swiftly and accurately. Visual presentation of data in graphs, bar charts or logic trees allows complex information to be communicated relatively easily.

By presenting the aggregated data for the whole organisation alongside that for smaller units of analysis or sub-groups, comparisons can easily be made. The type of groupings that can be examined in this way include: - department - job level - occupation - type of contract - location - gender - age group.


By combining this with a breakdown of the absence data into different types of reports (eg time lost, frequency) and, where the data allows it, by cause of absence (eg time lost due to back pain, frequency of absence caused by colds, coughs and flu), we can gain a better idea of what the underlying cause of absence in each sub-group was. This in turn gives us a stronger basis for action in managing and reducing absence.

The presentation of absence data in these forms should occur on a regular basis to allow a timely response to new problem areas. For line managers it may be useful to have absence data circulated on a monthly basis, whereas this might be quarterly for senior managers.

### 2.7.2 Feedback to employees

Employees should also receive regular feedback on the absence rates for their team or department. The figures presented to employees should also allow them to make comparisons between their own group's absence and that of other parts of the organisation, as well as improvements or deteriorations over time, or progress towards targets for absence. Not only does such feedback demonstrate to employees that absence levels are monitored, but it can also act as an incentive to employees and

## Absence and Attendance

managers to improve attendance. In fact, there is evidence that providing employees with regular feedback on their absence levels can actually reduce absence among employees who have shown above-average levels of absence (Gaudine and Saks, 2001).

### 2.7.3 Benchmarking

Comparing your organisation's absence levels with those from other organisations can be a useful exercise to help determine what are acceptable levels of absence and set targets for improvements. Various sources of comparative absence data are available including:

- annual surveys of employers published by the CIPD (2006a) and CBI (2007) which provide estimates of national, sectoral and regional average absence rates
- the quarterly Labour Force Survey (eg HSE, 2007b)
- sharing information with other organisations through local or sectoral bodies (eg Chamber of Commerce, Local Government Association).

The use of benchmark data can help an organisation to evaluate the level and significance of an absence problem (CIPD, 2006b). However, such data must be treated with caution. Because of the variety of absence measures that are used, it is important to ensure that comparisons are made only between equivalent statistics that have been calculated in exactly the same way. In the annual surveys of employers, the very low sample sizes for some of the regional or industrial groups can lead to wide variations in the sub-group data from year to year. These benchmarking figures should therefore be examined over a number of years to check their stability and determine how much confidence may be placed in them.

### 2.8 Applications and services for measuring absence

There are a large number of software applications that organisations can purchase to assist with recording and reporting absence data. Some of these products are software packages designed primarily for the management of sickness absence, whereas others are general HR software applications that include absence recording for all types of absence. In addition, an increasing number of companies offer absence management services which include hosted absence recording services (eg call centres to which employees report their absence and which monitor and summarise absence data). An HSE-funded report by Hutchison et al (2006) provides an up-to-date and comprehensive review of the applications and services available to assist in the measuring of absence.

### 2.9 Summary

Although a wide range of absence measures are available, they should all be used with discretion. Best practice in the measurement of absence is to:

- develop clear procedures for the employees and line managers concerning how an employee's absence should be reported
- communicate these procedures and develop a culture of reliable collection of absence information
- collect sufficiently detailed information about each absence event, including information on the cause of the absence, preferably using a coding system
- use a variety of different methods to report different aspects of absence data, including absence rate, frequency, duration, and Bradford scores
- where possible, examine these measures separately for medically-certified and self-certified absences
- avoid making assumptions about the nature of absence on the basis of insufficiently detailed data
- present the data by sub-groups such as department, job level, type of contract, etc
- use the reports of absence to help develop absence management interventions and to guide and target their use
- calculate the costs of absence in terms of the direct, indirect and absence management costs
- consider the options provided by different applications and services for assisting with the measurement and reporting of absence.


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## Absence and Attendance

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