



Employees under scrutiny with attendance promotion programs

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What is an attendance promotion program?

Employers are increasingly using programs intended to reduce the amount of money they lose on the sick days taken by their employees.

These programs have been around for a long time, and while at first they consisted largely of individual meetings with employees who seemed to be using more sick time than others. Unions have been objecting to them as long as they've been around, and over time, they have evolved into programs intended to ensure a consistent approach for all employees.

Employers use attendance promotion programs to establish a threshold for "normal" sick time usage in a specific workplace or field, then hold meetings with the individual employees who are above this threshold or exhibit problematic or suspicious patterns of absence.

Are they allowed to do this?

Within limited confines, arbitrators reinforce the employers' rights to have these programs. That being said, arbitrators are clear these programs should not include employees with chronic disabilities. While the meetings are billed as non-punitive, they can lead to serious consequences. Because the meetings could, under some circumstances, trigger a process leading up to and including dismissal, HSA strongly urges members to involve their stewards from the outset.

Furthermore, we have concerns about any attendance promotion program that fails to take into account factors forcing employees to use more sick time than their colleagues: serious injury, emotional distress brought on by life changes like death or divorce, drug or alcohol addiction and chronic illness. Employers must deal with chronic illness through established processes defined in your contract, not through attendance programs. If you are suffering from any of these problems or any situation that is making it difficult for you to attend work regularly talk to your steward.

Finally, employers have not been able to reconcile these practices with the fact that health professionals are more likely to be exposed to contagious illness and then are asked to protect public health by staying home for several days when symptomatic of the flu. Some employers hold these "quarantine" policies against employees in the calculation of sick time and HSA continues to raise these concerns in our discussions.

What happens in these meetings?

Generally, employees are told they are a valuable member of the workplace team and asked if there is any reason why their attendance is falling behind. Employees may also be asked if there is anything the employer can do to help out by, for example, assisting with medical appointments or promoting healthy lifestyle. We do not object to employers asking if they can help facilitate medical appointments or bear the cost of treatment but we do object to questions about lifestyle choices. The meetings conclude with the employer informing the employee that there is an expectation that attendance will improve and usually informing them of potential consequences should attendance not improve.

What should I do if I'm called for a meeting?

Before you attend any meetings of this nature talk to your steward or contact the HSAs main office at 604-439-0994 or toll-free 1-800-663-2017. 

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