

Absence management

1 Do you have an absence problem?

Questions this tool is designed to help you answer

- Do you have a problem with absence?
- What is the nature of the absence problem(s)?
- What are the likely causes of the problem(s)?
- What steps are likely to be most effective at addressing the problem(s)?
- How do you prevent the problem(s) from recurring?

We would welcome your feedback

If you have any queries about these tools or would like to contact us, you can get in touch with the CIPD at:

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What are the potential causes of absence?

How do you diagnose the factors likely to influence absence levels?

How do you develop solutions to absence problems?

For you:

- Develop a systematic approach to reviewing absence issues.
- Focus your attention and resources on the areas of greatest need.
- Understand the most appropriate solutions for your organisational circumstances.
- Identify the most useful sources of further guidance and information.

For your organisation:

- Develop an absence strategy that genuinely reflects the realities of your organisation's circumstances and needs.
- Target your resources on the areas of greatest potential impact.
- Find solutions that are sustained, mutually reinforcing and based on external best practice.

Who is the tool for?

- HR practitioners in organisations without established absence strategies or policies (or where such strategies or policies are in need of significant revision or updating).
- Operational managers in organisations or parts of organisations without professional HR support.

What's in the tool?

- Tips on how to gather and analyse absence data – organisationally, by subgroups and individually.
- Information on how to make sense of absence data and identify trends and patterns.
- Guidance on potential responses – linking trends to appropriate solutions.

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Organisations are increasingly recognising the significant costs associated with high levels of employee absence. At the same time, managers are often unsure about the level and nature of the problems they may be facing, or about how these problems are most effectively addressed. Most managers would accept, for example, that some level of absence is inevitable (and that it's generally desirable for employees to be absent from work if they're genuinely ill). Equally, most managers recognise that handling individual absence issues is often complex and potentially sensitive.

The absence management tool is designed to provide a summary of how to manage absence. It includes four tools: Do you have an absence problem?; How to develop an absence strategy; Managing short-term absence; Managing long-term absence.

This tool is intended to help organisations conduct a systematic review of their absence issues and requirements. And it will help managers gather reliable and useful data on absence levels, to analyse this data in order to identify trends or issues, and to interpret these findings so that appropriate solutions and responses can be developed.

The tool acts as a starting point for organisations and managers in addressing absence issues. It will lead users towards further sources of relevant information, as well as to further diagnostic and development tools in areas such as absence management strategy and handling individual absence cases.

The tool is the result of a collaboration between the CIPD, the Health and Safety Executive and ACAS. It is designed to give a good overview of some of the key issues that need to be considered in order to manage absence effectively, with links to a range of further resources.

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- If not, you need to establish a robust process for gathering, collating and analysing data on individual absence levels. The first step is to ensure you're collecting data consistently and rigorously.

[Example of individual absence recording form \(ACAS\)](#)

[Example of monthly summary of absence form \(ACAS\)](#)

- Your organisation needs to collect and record data on individual absence in any case to ensure accurate payment of [Statutory Sick Pay \(SSP\)](#). Ideally this data should be collected in a form that also enables you to analyse absence types, trends and patterns. The suggested minimum information you'll need to help you manage absence and return to work, some of which you should already keep for SSP purposes, is:
 - name or identification of the employee concerned
 - where they can be contacted
 - date of the first day of absence
 - cause of absence
 - whether the injury or illness is considered to be work-related
 - working days absent (updated regularly)
 - date the employee was last contacted and the outcome
 - expected length of absence, if known
 - return-to-work date.

Source: Health and Safety Executive Booklet: [Managing Sickness Absence and Return to Work](#)

- In recording the nature/cause of each incidence of absence, try to use categories that are simple but meaningful. For example:
 - short-term or acute medical conditions (cold, influenza and so on)
 - musculo-skeletal injuries
 - stress-related
 - long-term or chronic illness
 - work-related injury
 - other.

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Select categories that are likely to help inform your decisions on suitable responses. For example, if you identify a high level of work-related injuries, this may indicate a need for improved health and safety practices in the workplace.

Employers must be careful not to breach the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA) when they collect, use and store information about their employees' absence. Details of an employee's health, either physical or mental, are categorised as 'sensitive personal data' under the DPA. The DPA also requires openness. Staff should know what information about their health is being collected and why. The Office of the Information Commissioner has issued guidance on employers' responsibilities. For further information, see our [factsheet on data protection](#).

If you collect data on individual absence levels, do you use this to identify patterns or trends in absence at the individual and/or collective levels?

- Do you collate and review the individual absence data?
- If not, ensure that someone has responsibility to do this at the appropriate levels in the organisation, for example, in teams, departments and across the organisation as a whole.
- Make sure that absence data is collated and presented on a consistent basis.

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Approaches to measuring absence

The most common measure of absence is the lost-time rate. This shows the percentage of the total time available that has been lost because of absence from all causes in a given period:

$$\frac{\text{total absence (hours or days) in the period}}{\text{possible total (hours or days) available in the period}} \times 100 = \text{lost-time rate}$$

For example, if the total absence in the period is 124 hours, and the possible total is 1,550 hours, the lost-time rate is:

$$(124 \div 1,550) \times 100 = 8\%$$

The lost-time rate can be regarded as an overall measure of the severity of the problem. If calculated separately by department or group of workers, it can show up particular problem areas.

Total time lost, however, may consist of a small number of people who are absent for long periods, or a large number absent for short spells. A measure of 'frequency' is needed to show how widespread the problem is, so that companies can formulate appropriate plans to reduce it. The frequency rate shows the average number of spells of absence per worker (expressed as a percentage) irrespective of the length of each spell:

$$\frac{\text{number of spells of absence in the period}}{\text{number of workers in the period}} \times 100 = \text{frequency rate}$$

If the organisation wishes to monitor the number of workers absent at all during the period, the individual frequency rate can be used:

$$\frac{\text{number of workers having one or more spells of absence}}{\text{number of workers}} \times 100 = \text{individual frequency}$$

For example, in one month, an organisation employed on average 80 workers. During this time, 12 workers had periods of absence: one was away three times, two were away twice and nine were away once, a total number of 16 spells of absence.

The frequency rate was therefore:

$$(16 \div 80) \times 100 = 20\%$$

The individual frequency rate was:

$$(12 \div 80) \times 100 = 15\%$$

Another individual index of absence, the Bradford Factor developed by Bradford University, highlights repeated short-term absence by giving extra weight to the number of absences:

index (I) = S x S x H, where:

S = the number of absences H = total hours absent in any given period

Source: ACAS advisory booklet: [Absence and Labour Turnover](#)

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- Ensure that data can be analysed across all relevant subgroups. This will allow you to review levels and patterns of absence:
 - individuals – how often and when is Person A absent?
 - teams or workgroups – are there any discernible patterns or trends of absence across different teams within a given department?
 - departments or functions – are there any discernible patterns or trends of absence between, say, production and administration functions?
 - specific locations – are there any discernible patterns or trends of absence between sites in different parts of the country?
 - the organisation as a whole – are there any organisation-wide levels and patterns of absence? Having this information will provide a benchmark for reviewing individual and local data.
- It's important that data is analysed at all of these levels, as this will enable you to draw meaningful comparisons, which in turn may help you identify the nature and potential causes of the absence problems facing your organisation. This will help you to identify, for example:
 - overall levels of absence across the organisation
 - relative levels of absence in specific parts of the organisation – for example, is absence higher in some departments or locations?
 - the nature of absence within the organisation – for example, the balance between long-term absence and short-term and/or recurrent absence
 - the incidence of absence in the organisation – for example, whether a small proportion of the workforce is responsible for a substantial amount of overall absence.

Do you know how your absence levels compare with those in other organisations?

- Absence levels vary significantly between industrial sectors and between different geographical areas. External benchmark data may therefore help to determine whether a given level of absence is 'reasonable'. There are various national and local sources of comparative absence data.
- At the local or sectoral level, it may be useful to establish benchmarking or other data-sharing arrangements with relevant comparator organisations – for example, with other employers in your locality or in your industrial sector.
- Benchmark data can only be indicative, and needs to be treated with some caution (for example, the characteristics of the specific organisation may have a much greater impact on its absence levels than its location or sector). But it can help you to evaluate the level and significance of the problems you face. If your absence levels are significantly higher than the norm for your sector, this suggests that investment in reducing absence levels is likely to be justified. If your absence levels are comparatively low, you may still feel that action is justified, but you may need to recognise that the payback could be more limited.

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Benchmarking your organisation

Benchmarking is important because it tells you how well your organisation is performing compared with competitors and the world at large, highlighting areas for improvement, and helping to set performance standards.

The [CIPD](#) and the [Confederation of British Industry \(CBI\)](#) publish regular reports providing the latest data for benchmarking purposes. Both are surveys of employers. The information in the surveys includes the overall absence rate, and breakdowns by region, sector, and organisation size.

However, it's important to remember, when using such benchmarking data, that smaller organisations in terms of employee numbers have lower rates of absence than larger organisations.

In addition, at a disaggregated level, some of the data from these sources can be very volatile over time. For example, comparing regional and industrial data for the last few years shows considerable movement in the rank order of the best and worst performers. Often this results from the very low sample sizes in some sectors and regions, which can distort the results from year to year. You can have reasonable confidence in the broader figures, and in the more general occupational and industrial data. But it's always sensible to look at benchmarking data over a period of years to check whether there has been a lot of volatility and to decide how much faith you attach to them.

Further occupational information can be found in the quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS), which collects data from households on a range of subjects, including absence rates. The information is therefore based on responses from employees.

The CBI and the CIPD are important sources of general information on absence levels. But you might want something less general and more specific to your needs, such as absence levels in your locality or sector, or for particular occupations. Options for gathering this kind of information include setting up a club of employers who agree to provide their absence rates, or using, say, an existing pay club survey to gather absence details. Another possibility is to seek the help of local employer bodies, such as Chambers of Commerce, or your own industry body, both of whom may already be collecting absence data.

When you've found benchmarking data that meets your needs, remember that your target shouldn't be just to match your absence rate with the average. This might be your immediate objective, but being among the best 25% makes a better longer-term aim and will help to keep managing absence firmly on your organisation's agenda.

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If absence levels are high, what absence patterns can you see?

- The pattern of absence in your organisation is likely to provide you with some initial indications of the nature and causes of the problems you face. Typical questions you might want to ask include:

Checklist of absence patterns

- What is the balance between long-term absence and short-term, recurrent absence?
 - If absence levels are high primarily because of a number of long-term absences (see [Tool 4](#)), you may need to consider whether and how these individual cases can be resolved.
 - If absence levels are high primarily because of recurrent short-term absences (see [Tool 3](#)), you need to consider what strategy and actions are most likely to address this issue.
- How widespread is absenteeism across the workforce – that is, are the absence levels significantly influenced by a relatively small number of individuals with poor attendance records?
 - If so, it may be appropriate to take some relatively targeted action to deal with the individual cases in question. If not, you may be facing a broader organisational culture or climate issue.
- Are absence levels particularly high in any specific area of the business, for example, in particular departments or locations?
 - If so, it may be appropriate to target initial investigations on the areas in question to see if there are any specific issues or causes that can be addressed.
- Are there any particular patterns of absence, particularly in terms of timing – like high levels of absence on Fridays or Mondays or at key times such as month- or quarter-end?
 - If so, these patterns can provide clues as to the potential causes of the absence, for example, pressures relating to particular work cycles.

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How can you explore the possible causes of absence?

Statistical analysis is important but provides only part of the picture, and may potentially be misleading. For example, if absence levels are particularly high in a particular department, this may reflect a variety of factors – the nature of the work, the location, management style, physical or environmental factors and so on. In identifying the likely causes of absence, therefore, it’s often helpful to supplement this statistical data with qualitative exploration of the issues through interviews or group sessions. This might include:

- interviews with managers and team leaders, either across the organisation as a whole or within areas where absence levels are high
- group sessions with samples of employees – again, either across the organisation as a whole or targeted on areas where absence levels are high
- questions incorporated into employee attitude surveys.

[Interviews, focus groups and surveys](#)

[Conducting initial focus groups](#)

[Conducting surveys](#)

[Framework for management interviews](#)

[Framework for employee groups](#)

[The Health and Safety Executive management standards for work-related stress](#)

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Interviews, focus groups and surveys

A statistical analysis of absence patterns within the organisation provides essential baseline data for beginning to identify the characteristics and causes of absence. However, it's important not to jump to conclusions too quickly. It's easy to assume, for example, that a high incidence of short-term uncertificated absence must be indicative of malingering and is therefore most appropriately addressed through a punitive approach, such as withholding occupational sick pay or using disciplinary procedures. This may be appropriate, but the absence levels may also be indicative of more deep-rooted organisational problems, such as issues of morale, culture or management style. If so, while a punitive approach may bring short-term improvements, it will probably only exacerbate the problems if the underlying causes haven't been addressed. Absence levels may begin to rise again, or the dissatisfaction may simply find expression in other ways – declining productivity, increasing staff turnover, and so on.

Having identified any key patterns or trends in the absence data, you need to gather more qualitative data that will help you get behind the bare statistics. It may, for example, be useful to gather the views and opinions of supervisors and line managers. Ideally, where the organisational climate is felt to be appropriate, steps should also be taken to gather the views of employees across the organisation.

In smaller organisations, opinions can be gathered by means of face-to-face interviews or group discussions, while in larger organisations a written questionnaire-based survey may be more appropriate. The latter also has the advantage that it can be conducted anonymously and may therefore encourage more frank and honest replies than face-to-face interviews. Careful thought must be given to the contents of interviews or questionnaires to ensure they explore the causes that are relevant to the circumstances of your organisation.

The [checklist of absence causes](#) summarises a range of potential causes of absence. In practice, not all will be relevant to every organisation. It's therefore necessary to select those that are most likely to be relevant to your particular organisational circumstances. In many cases, the most effective approach is to use the available statistical data to develop initial ideas about the likely nature and causes of absence in your organisation, as described above. The interviews or questionnaire can then be used to test and explore these ideas in detail.

Alternatively (or additionally), it may be helpful to organise some initial focus groups of managers and employees to discuss the issue of absence. These focus groups don't at this stage need to be statistically representative of the organisation, but they should include an appropriate cross-section of the workforce in terms of variables like grade, occupation and location. Each group can include a mix of these different variable groups, although it's generally preferable to separate respective grades or levels of staff so that participants don't feel constrained from speaking openly in front of their managers or subordinates.

Clearly, if your organisation's absence problems appear to be largely concentrated in a particular area, such as a specific function or location, you may wish to restrict the data-gathering to this group. But, even in such cases, it's often helpful to seek the views of a wider group, as this enables you to compare the views expressed in apparent 'problem' areas with those of the wider organisation. This comparison can be revealing – for example, highlighting differing reactions to apparently similar organisational factors. For instance, one group may be motivated and stimulated by changing organisational requirements, whereas another group may perceive this as a significant source of stress.

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Conducting initial focus groups

These initial focus groups are best conducted in a relatively open, semi-structured format, enabling the group to explore the issues surrounding absence without excessive external direction or leadership. It may be helpful to begin by asking the group to brainstorm the most significant causes of absence in the organisation. The group's unprompted responses to this question will provide a valuable indication of their own sense of priorities in this area. The results of the brainstorm can then be explored in more detail, along with any additional issues the group facilitator wishes to introduce.

In addition, the facilitator may want to stimulate discussions by presenting to the group an overview of the absence statistics for the organisation, highlighting any specific areas of interest or concern, such as differences in absence levels between different parts of the organisation. The group can then explore these specific issues, providing their views as to the reasons for the variations in absence levels. This can often be a useful means of challenging or exploring statements from the group that might appear glib or partial.

For example, if the group's initial reaction is to blame work demands for causing stress-related absence, it might be fruitful to ask the group to review absence levels in areas where work requirements are very different. This might help to confirm their view, or it could raise further questions, encouraging the group to acknowledge a wider range of causal factors.

Overall, the aim should be to encourage the group to talk openly and frankly, rather than simply to express the accepted 'party line' within the organisation. In a high-pressure business, for example, managers may be reluctant to acknowledge problems with stress, which might be perceived as expressions of weakness or inability to cope. Similarly, managers may be tempted to allocate the 'blame' for absence primarily on their subordinates, rather than acknowledging broader problems of management style or culture. Equally, non-management employees may prefer to ascribe absence problems primarily to problems with management, rather than acknowledging cultural or attitudinal problems at more junior levels in the organisation.

Nevertheless, if skilfully facilitated, the dynamic of a group discussion will generally enable participants gradually to address issues more openly, particularly if a diverse range of opinion is being expressed. Furthermore, by comparing the views of different groups of management and non-management staff, you can begin to develop a more 'three-dimensional' view of the organisation, highlighting recurrent themes as well as differences in perceptions. This in turn will provide guidance on the issues to be tested or explored further in subsequent groups or in the survey itself.

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Conducting surveys

In smaller organisations, it can be enough to conduct a programme of focus groups and interviews. In larger organisations, it's generally helpful to validate this information through a questionnaire-based survey, either on a stand-alone basis or as part of a broader employee opinion survey. Ideally, surveys should be anonymous so respondents are encouraged to express their views fully and openly.

However, it's essential that the questionnaire includes at least basic demographic data to enable the responses to be analysed meaningfully. This might, for example, include department location, job type and grade/level. In practice, there's always a need to balance the desire for anonymity with the need to collect meaningful demographic data – if this information is too detailed, participants might feel there's a risk of being identified. So care should be taken to collect only demographic data that will genuinely be used to inform subsequent analysis. Always explain very clearly to participants why this information is needed and how it will be used.

The detail of the questionnaire can be developed in various ways, depending on the level and complexity of the information required. As a minimum, the questionnaire should enable you to assess the strength of response to the potential causes of absence identified. In its simplest form, the questionnaire might just present a list of potential causes, distilled from the focus group responses, with respondents asked to rate each of the possible causes on a scale from, say, 1 ('highly insignificant cause') to 6 ('highly significant cause') for each employee category. Keeping an even number of ratings (such as six in the above example) forces respondents to rate causes as either significant or not, because there's no middle rating for them to choose as this doesn't produce useful information. This approach will produce a rank order of causes as perceived to relate to different categories of staff. This in turn can be analysed in relation to the various respondent groups, highlighting any significant trends or variations in perception.

If required, more sophisticated survey tools can be applied to explore these issues in more detail. For example, it's possible to design question frameworks that will drill down into specific topic areas to enable your survey to gather relatively precise information about employee perceptions, preferences or priorities. If, for example, stress is perceived to be a significant cause, it may be appropriate to gather more information about the nature and levels of stress as perceived by employees.

For example, respondents might be asked to rate a range of potential 'stressors' in terms of their perceived impact on absence levels, and to provide guidance on the steps that would be most likely to reduce organisational stress and improve attendance. Similarly, if the focus group findings indicate that the organisation's prevailing management style may be influencing absence levels, the questionnaire might seek respondents' views about the nature and quality of management in the organisation, about their own line managers, or about the kinds of changes that would improve management effectiveness.

At a more pragmatic level, if the focus groups indicate that absence levels are being adversely affected by factors such as unsocial working patterns, domestic difficulties or transport problems, the questionnaire can be used to gather detailed information about specific requirements or preferences. For example, it's not uncommon to find that relatively small changes in working patterns can bring significant benefits in terms of [\(continued\)](#)

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domestic convenience – by providing easier access to public transport, childcare and so on. An effectively designed questionnaire can help the organisation to identify the precise types of provision that are most likely to meet employees' specific needs.

In the [checklist of absence causes](#), some of the most commonly cited causes of absence within organisations are listed. For each one, the checklist gives some of the issues and questions that might be explored in both focus groups and written questionnaires in order to gather more information on the issue in question. Depending on the outcomes of the initial focus groups, it would be possible to construct an appropriate validation questionnaire by selecting the relevant items from the list and, using the outline questions provided, construct a detailed questionnaire that would provide reliable and meaningful data in the required areas. However, it should be stressed that considerable care is needed in both the design and application of written employee questionnaires.

First, it's important not to be overambitious in the size and scope of your questionnaire. In practice, if it's intended to provide detailed information on the selected issues, it will probably be appropriate to focus on no more than four or five key themes. If you attempt to gather data on all the potential causes of absence, you're likely to produce a highly unwieldy questionnaire, which will be confusing for respondents and difficult to interpret meaningfully. You need to carefully prioritise the topics to be addressed, identifying the factors you believe likely to have the most significant impact on absence levels in the organisation. At the same time, it's a good idea to underpin the questionnaire with a more general question asking respondents to rate the importance of potential causes to ensure that your initial assumptions are correct.

Second, the questionnaire should provide appropriately detailed and meaningful data to inform subsequent decision-making and action in the areas concerned. One of the most common shortcomings of employee surveys is that they tend only to provide a relatively superficial perspective on the issues addressed, highlighting apparent problems without providing enough information to inform potential solutions.

This is a particular problem with the familiar survey format in which respondents are asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with a series of statements. Although this format can be a useful means of exploring employee attitudes to a range of topics, without careful design it can severely constrain the information gathered. The survey may, for instance, indicate that respondents have a generally negative attitude towards a particular topic, but it might provide relatively little information on the reasons behind this attitude or the potential steps that might be taken to address it.

For this reason, it's often more helpful to use a range of question formats – for example, not only exploring respondents' attitudes to specific topics, but also seeking their views on the relative importance of possible causes or the relative value of potential solutions. Although a survey can't in itself provide the solutions to absence problems, a carefully designed questionnaire can directly and meaningfully inform potential responses. At the same time, it's true that, in crude terms, the longer and more complex the questionnaire, the lower the response rate will be, with consequences for the quality and representativeness of the data gathered. It's always necessary to strike a balance – ensuring the questionnaire is as short and as simple as it is practicable, consistent with collecting meaningful data in priority areas.

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Third, at a more basic level, it's important that the questionnaire is clear, unambiguous and easy to complete. There's always a risk, if the questionnaire is being developed by managers who have been heavily involved in all aspects of the absence management programme, that they may take for granted a level of knowledge that's not actually shared by the workforce at large – for example, about HR terminology, details of working patterns, arrangements for sick pay, and so on. Equally, the questionnaire may prove to be too long, confusing to complete, or unclear or ambiguous in its content. If the questionnaire refers to 'management' or 'managers', for instance, it may be necessary to define clearly the level of management in question. If the questionnaire hasn't been used previously, it's always worth conducting a limited pilot among a suitable cross-section of staff to get feedback on both the questionnaire's content and ease of completion.

Framework for management interviews

Begin by reviewing a selection of recent cases of absence in the manager's own area, say, over the last three months:

- What were the stated causes of the absence, and were these generally accepted by the manager?
- Does the manager have any knowledge of the absence background or history of the individuals concerned?
- Are there any evidence trends or patterns in the cases of absence over the selected period?

Although the individual cases are used as a prompt, the primary focus shouldn't be on the detail of the cases themselves but on any overall patterns in terms of the types or causes of absence.

Explore the manager's own perceptions of the factors influencing absence levels both in their own area and across the organisation as a whole. Local or front-line managers in particular may be aware of practical factors affecting attendance – for example, in respect of travel-to-work issues, workload, environmental factors, and so on.

Explore the manager's own attitudes to and experiences of handling absence. The aim at this stage isn't to question or criticise the manager's handling of absence issues, but rather to gain an understanding of how managers are currently responding to absence issues – whether they're aware of any existing organisational absence policies, whether they're applying such policies consistently, whether they're taking responsibility for addressing absence issues, and so on.

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Framework for employee groups

Begin by asking participants to brainstorm the most common causes of absence in the organisation. An open-ended discussion, without any initial prompting, will help to identify employees' priorities, and may help to highlight factors that might not be evident to managers – for example, issues about management style.

Present and explore absence statistics for various parts of the organisation, in particular comparing areas of high and low absence levels. You can then get participants' views on the reasons for these variations. As well as helping to identify potential causes of absence, this may also be useful in raising employee awareness of relative absence levels across the organisation.

Gather participants' views on positive actions that might be taken to improve absence levels, both across the organisation as a whole and within their own departments or teams. This may be useful in moving the discussion on from negative criticisms (for example, of management style) to a more constructive approach.

The Health and Safety Executive management standards for work-related stress

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) management standards on stress provide step-by-step [good practice guidance](#) to help organisations carry out a risk assessment for work-related stress.

Stress is defined by the HSE as 'the adverse reaction an individual has to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them'.

The standards are designed to establish whether employees are satisfied with their work in the following areas:

Demands	Includes issues like workload, work patterns, and the work environment
Control	Covers how much say or autonomy the person has in the way they do their work
Support	Includes the encouragement, backing and resources provided to employees by the organisation, line management and colleagues
Roles	Relates to whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that the person does not have conflicting job roles
Relationships	Includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour, such as bullying at work
Change	Includes how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation and the extent to which employees are engaged in the process

Organisations following the standards use an employee questionnaire, which asks a series of questions around the six causes of stress, as well as staff focus groups to discuss any issues highlighted by the survey in more detail. They will then develop an action plan which will set out proposed solutions.

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An action plan is a key part of the risk assessment and should at least include the following:

- what the problem is
- how the problem was identified
- what the organisation is going to do in response
- how it arrived at this solution
- some key milestones and dates for them to be reached
- a commitment to provide feedback to employees on progress
- a date for reviewing against the plan.

The legal case: the law requires employers to tackle stress

The management standards are not new laws. However, employers already have duties:

Under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999:

- to assess the risk of stress-related ill health arising from work activities.

Under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974:

- to take measures to control that risk.

HSE expects organisations to carry out a suitable and sufficient risk assessment for stress, and to take action to tackle any problems identified by that risk assessment. The Standards are intended to help and encourage you to do this and to show that you have done so.

What are the potential causes of absence?

In reviewing the statistical and qualitative data, you may wish to consider a wide range of potential causes. In practice, absence levels can be influenced by factors such as:

- role and organisational factors
- medical factors
- external and social factors.

Statistically, it's also clear that absence levels can be influenced by the personal characteristics of the employees in question. For example, older employees tend to suffer more from ill health than younger ones. It may be helpful to consider the profile of the workforce in terms of age, gender, length of service and so on, but in practice the picture is often complicated. For example, older employees may suffer more from ill health but take a more responsible approach to attendance. Even if personal characteristics are significant, it may be difficult to take any action to change them.

In most cases, therefore, it will be more relevant and productive to consider potential causes in the areas set out below – you may wish to consider the patterns and levels of absence evident in your organisation against the questions set out under each heading.

How do you diagnose the factors likely to influence absence levels?

Role and organisational factors – review

Work and role design. Absence is likely to be higher in areas where work is boring or unsatisfying, where job roles are unclear, or where there has been 'role creep', with additional responsibilities added gradually.

- Does absence appear to be higher in areas where work is likely to be more routine and less satisfying?
 - If so, can you take any steps to enhance or enrich the work involved?
- Is a lack of clarity over job roles affecting absence levels?
 - If so, can you provide greater clarity, for example by revisiting job descriptions or through extra training?

Confusion over job role or poor work design can be a major cause of [work-related stress](#).

Workload and stress. Absence is likely to be higher where workload is excessive, where people feel a lack of control over their working activities or conditions, or where there is significant job insecurity:

- Does absence appear to be higher in areas with high or predictable workloads?
- Does absence appear to increase at times of heavier workload?
- Does absence appear to be higher in areas where jobs are felt to be less secure?
 - If so, are there any practical steps you can take to reduce or control workload, or to improve perceptions of job security?

Excessive workload can be a major cause of [work-related stress](#).

Organisation and team size. In general, absence tends to be higher in larger organisations and in larger teams and workgroups, where employees tend to feel more anonymous or believe that their individual absence is unlikely to have a significant effect on their colleagues' or overall performance levels:

- Does absence appear to be higher in larger departments, workgroups or teams?
 - If so, are there any steps you can take to reduce workgroup size – for example, by breaking groups down into smaller teams?

Occupational sick pay. Unsurprisingly, absence tends to be higher in organisations where occupational sick pay arrangements are more generous. While this isn't in itself a reason to remove or reduce occupational sick pay provisions, it may be appropriate to consider whether the nature and level of provision is suited to the needs of the business:

- Has the organisation struck the right balance in its occupational sick pay policies between supporting employees who are genuinely sick and discouraging unjustified absence?
 - If not, is it appropriate to impose any additional limits of occupational sick pay, for example by linking provision to length of service or by introducing or increasing qualifying periods?

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Organisational culture or climate. The prevailing culture, both in the organisation as a whole and in particular workgroups, may be one of the most significant influencers of absence levels. If, for example, the management style is perceived as aggressive or uncaring, employees may feel less commitment to attending work:

- Does there appear to be any link between absence levels and the prevailing culture or style of different parts of the organisation?
 - If so, are there steps you can take to change or improve the organisational culture, for example through targeted management training or development?

CIPD research identifies management style as a major cause of [work-related stress](#).

Medical factors

Clearly, the majority of legitimate absence will be caused by medical factors of various kinds. Although no reasonable employer would wish to compel employees to attend work when they're unfit to do so, it may be that some action can be taken to address specific types of health-related absence, including absence resulting from:

Injuries at work. A high incidence of work-related injuries would clearly indicate a need to improve health and safety practice in the workplace:

- Is the organisation's health and safety record satisfactory?
- Are there high levels of work-related accidents and/or injuries?
 - If so, what steps can you take to improve health and safety practices?

Lifestyle factors. This might range from employees who simply allow their domestic lifestyle to affect their ability to attend work through to those with serious drink- or drug-related problems:

- Is there any evidence that a significant proportion of absence is attributable to lifestyle issues?
 - If so, in addition to any actions you might take in respect of individual cases, are there any general steps you can take to address these issues, for example through awareness campaigns, or support for those quitting smoking, or drug testing?

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Persistent or recurrent conditions. Even in cases where the absence is caused by genuine ill health, it may be possible to help the individual take medical or other action to reduce the potential impact:

- Does a significant proportion of absence appear to be attributable to these kinds of persistent conditions?
- Is there any evidence that these are influenced by working conditions or requirements?
 - If so, can you take any steps to address these environmental or other factors?
- In addition to any actions you might take in respect of individual cases, are there any steps you can take to improve the general health of the workforce, for example through diagnostic or preventative clinics, health education, provision of or support for health club membership and so on?

External and social factors

These might include, for example:

Family, carer or other domestic commitments. Most employees experience some form of domestic difficulty on occasions, and in many organisations it's easier and more socially 'acceptable' to report sick than simply to arrive late or to attribute absence to domestic commitments. Increased flexibility in working hours or patterns can often be a useful tool to address these kinds of issues:

- Is there any evidence that a significant proportion of absence, either in the organisation as a whole or in specific areas, is potentially attributable to carer commitments?
 - If so, are there any steps you can take to provide assistance, for example through more flexible working, support for homeworking where appropriate, or provision of 'carer' or 'emergency' leave?

Travel difficulties. This is a basic but often significant issue, particularly if the work location isn't easily accessible. Unsurprisingly, absence levels tend to be higher where journeys to or from work are longer or more problematic:

- Do absence levels appear to be higher in locations or among staff groups (such as shift workers) in cases where there are difficulties travelling to or from work?
 - If so, are there any additional steps you can take to provide travel support?

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Checklist of absence causes

Personal characteristics of employees	Issues/trends	Possible solutions	Issues and questions for investigation
Length of service	Absence levels tend to be higher in cases where length of service is shorter	Initiatives or actions to reduce labour turnover	<p>What is the organisation's overall profile in terms of length of service?</p> <p>Is staff turnover higher in specific workgroups?</p> <p>What are the dynamics/causes of staff turnover?</p>
Age	Older employees tend to suffer more sickness absence	Occupational health programmes	<p>What is the age profile of the workforce?</p> <p>What are actual absence patterns among particular age groups?</p> <p>In practice, what are the major causes of sickness absence, and what practical steps can be taken to address these?</p>
Gender	Younger females tend to have higher absence than males of the same age. However, consideration needs to be given to the potential influence of domestic or family responsibilities as an underlying cause	Childcare support, more flexible working patterns or other forms of family-friendly employment policies	<p>What is the gender profile of the workforce?</p> <p>What is the gender profile of specific workgroups? Is there a significantly higher percentage of women or men in particular parts of the organisation?</p> <p>In practice, what factors influence absence levels for each gender? What practical steps might be taken to address these?</p>
Education and career opportunities	Higher educational qualifications and opportunities to pursue a career tend to result in lower absence levels	Education and training at the workplace, together with policies for internal promotion and opportunities to learn new skills	<p>What is the educational profile of the workforce?</p> <p>Does the educational profile differ significantly between different workgroups?</p> <p>What kinds of career aspirations do employees have?</p> <p>What practical steps could be taken to improve career or progression opportunities?</p>

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Personal characteristics of employees	Issues/trends	Possible solutions	Issues and questions for investigation
Past absence patterns	Past absence patterns for individual employees have been shown to be useful indicators of future absence	Improved screening at recruitment and selection, including more effective use of references, pre-employment health questionnaires and medicals	What data is currently available on past absence patterns? What practical steps could be taken to improve the availability and quality of this data?
Family size	Absence has been found to be linked to family size, though again this may commonly be linked to issues of childcare and other domestic responsibilities	Childcare support, more flexible working patterns or other forms of family-friendly employment policies	In practice, what domestic or family-related factors are influencing individual absence levels? What practical steps can be taken to address these?
Employee attitudes, values, work orientations and commitment	Negative employee attitudes and low commitment to the organisation or work activities are associated with higher absence levels. These may be closely linked to job and organisational factors (listed below)	Improved assessment processes at recruitment and selection to ensure most appropriate match of individual to the organisation/role Initiatives to enhance commitment through employee communication, participation, involvement, job redesign and teamworking. See work-related stress	What is the overall culture of the workforce? Does this differ significantly between different workgroups? What are the factors that influence culture and attitudes in the organisation? What practical steps can be taken to address these factors?

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Job and organisational factors	Issues/trends	Possible solutions	Issues and questions for investigation
Work design	Absence is commonly related to lack of job satisfaction arising from routine and boring work	<p>Initiatives to redesign or reallocate work activities, perhaps through job enrichment or rotation</p> <p>Teamworking initiatives that provide greater autonomy to workgroups in controlling their work activities</p>	<p>How do absence levels differ between respective workgroups? Do they appear to be linked to variations in the type or level of the work?</p> <p>What are employees' perceptions of their work activities? In practice, does this affect their absence levels?</p> <p>What practical steps can be taken to improve work activities?</p>
Stress	<p>Work-related stress is increasingly being recognised as a significant cause of absence. In practice, stress may result from a variety of underlying causes, and these need to be assessed in detail. Potential causes include poor or unsafe working conditions, boredom, work overload, perceived lack of control over work activities, job insecurity, worry over career and promotional prospects, and workplace relationships. In addition, stress may arise from sources outside the workplace</p> <p>CIPD factsheet on stress</p>	<p>Depending on the nature and causes of stress in the workplace, initiatives might include occupational health activities, employee assistance programmes, and individual counselling. Stress might also be reduced through organisational changes in, for example, work design, management style, communications and resourcing. See work-related stress</p>	<p>What levels and types of stress are evident in the organisation? Do they vary significantly between different workgroups? To what extent do they appear to be affecting absence levels?</p> <p>What seem to be the major causes of stress in the organisation? What is the mix of individual, organisational and external factors?</p> <p>What practical steps can be taken to address these factors?</p> <p>(Note: although questions on stress may be built into a general investigatory survey, a number of well-validated stress audit tools are available that enable organisations to benchmark their stress levels against external norms)</p>
Organisation and workgroup size	Absence levels tend to be higher the larger the organisation and the larger the size of the workgroup	Possible layering or subdividing of organisations into smaller business units or profit centres, or establishing smaller, team-based workgroups. This may be particularly appropriate in larger, more impersonal organisational units, such as telephone contact centres	<p>Do absence levels appear to vary according to the size of the workgroup?</p> <p>If so, what factors are influencing absence levels – nature of the work, management style, belief that individual absence doesn't affect colleagues, and so on?</p> <p>What practical steps can be taken to address these factors?</p>

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Job and organisational factors	Issues/trends	Possible solutions	Issues and questions for investigation
Workgroup norms and cultures	Often embedded in the history and traditions of an organisation and reflecting the priority given by management to absence control and past willingness and ability to enforce sanctions. Where high absence control has been given a low priority, absence levels are likely to be high. Where management has laid out clear rules of conduct and enforced them consistently and fairly, absence levels are likely to be lower. Peer group pressure is also often a significant factor in enforcing high standards of attendance	<p>Initiatives to devolve decision-making, empowering teams to increase control of and accountability for their own activities and performance, which requires the team to take greater collective responsibility for attendance</p> <p>Arrangements such as prepaid committed overtime, on-call rotas, banked contingency time, and annualised hours arrangements can also increase employees' awareness of the negative impact of a colleague's absence</p>	<p>What has been the history of absence management in the organisation? Have high levels of absence traditionally been tolerated, either in the organisation as a whole or in particular workgroups? Have rules and procedures been applied clearly and consistently?</p> <p>What attitudes do employees have towards absence? Do they perceive current absence levels as reasonable and acceptable? Do they perceive some managers or workgroups as more tolerant of absence than others? What do they believe are the real causes of absence in the organisation? What impact do they believe absence has on their own workload?</p> <p>What practical steps can be taken to address these perceptions?</p>
Sick pay policies	Relationships have been found between the establishment of occupational sick pay schemes and higher absence, with time off being seen almost as an entitlement. Needless to say, you wouldn't advocate the withdrawal of occupational sick pay schemes, but aspects of their operation may need consideration	<p>Potential amendments to the detail or operation of the occupational sick pay scheme, for example making payments subject to management discretion, with the opportunity to withhold payment where there is clear evidence of abuse</p> <p>Other options include lengthening the period of service before entitlement starts, not paying for uncertified absence, or paying for the first few days of absence only after the absence has reached a certain length</p>	<p>What is the actual pattern of absence in the organisation? For example, is there a high incidence of short-term, uncertificated absence, either generally or in specific workgroups?</p> <p>What are employees' attitudes to absence? Do they believe that the availability of sick pay legitimises absence? Do they believe that some employees abuse this entitlement?</p> <p>What would be the perceived impact of increased constraints on the availability of sick pay?</p>

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External factors	Issues/trends	Possible solutions	Issues and questions for investigation
Economic and market conditions	Absence tends to rise in times of economic boom and fall in times of recession. During economic upturns, additional job opportunities are available and people are apparently less concerned about losing a job as a result of disciplinary sanctions. During economic downturns, people become more concerned about job security and are less likely to take time off	Organisations can do little to manage these external economic factors, but they should interpret their absence statistics and trends accordingly. While some rise in absence may occur in economic upturns, this shouldn't prevent organisations from applying absence control policies and sanctions to counter them. Equally, it may not be sensible for the organisation to exploit job insecurity to adopt a more punitive approach, as this may simply store up resentment for the future. Ideally, the organisation should interpret its absence trends in the light of prevailing economic conditions, but apply consistent standards and approaches	<p>What are employee attitudes to job security and their own employability? What factors influence these perceptions? To what extent do these attitudes affect employees' views of attendance?</p> <p>What practical steps can be taken to increase employees' intrinsic commitment to the organisation or to their current roles?</p>
Genuine illness	It has been reckoned that this accounts for between a half and two-thirds of all absence and is probably the most significant of all the causes of absence	While it's not appropriate to compel or encourage sick employees to attend work, the nature and causes of illness can, of course, be highly varied. It's clear, for example, that factors such as stress, personal and emotional problems, smoking and alcohol abuse may be underlying causes of a significant proportion of sickness absence. In practice, much can be done to tackle these issues, including pre-employment health questionnaires and medicals, policies on smoking at work and alcohol abuse, the promotion of better health awareness, programmes of preventative healthcare (such as influenza vaccinations or health checks), employee assistance programmes and counselling	<p>What are the stated causes of sickness absence in the organisation? Are any patterns evident, either generally or for particular workgroups?</p> <p>What practical steps can be taken to improve the overall health of the workforce or to address recurrent sickness problems?</p>

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Family responsibilities	Otherwise highly motivated employees may from time to time experience constraints in their ability to attend because of family or domestic responsibilities. These may include the illness of children or other family members, or domestic crises. Managers in the CBI's (1997) survey rated family or domestic responsibilities as the second most significant cause of absence after colds and flu	A range of policies can be adopted to address issues in this area. Options include flexitime – enabling employees to build up additional leave entitlements by accruing banks of additional hours worked – or emergency leave arrangements. Other potential areas of flexibility include a willingness to allow employees to transfer from full-time to part-time working, to job-share or to work permanently or occasionally from home	What do employees perceive as the major causes of non-medical absence? What domestic issues cause problems for employees in meeting their work commitments (even if these are currently handled without necessarily causing absence)? What practical steps would improve employees' ability to handle domestic problems that might otherwise conflict with their work commitments?
Travel difficulties	Absence levels rise the longer the journey to work, when the weather is poor, where road traffic is particularly congested, or where travel options are constrained by location or time of working. These factors create constraints on people's ability to attend, even if in normal circumstances they're motivated to do so	Screening at recruitment might usefully explore the nature of the journey a prospective employee will have to make. Provisions such as company transport services or the co-ordination of car-pooling may be appropriate, especially if the workplace or some working patterns are poorly served by public transport. Other options include greater flexibility to work remotely where transport is problematic.	What is the organisation's 'travel to work' area? Is there evidence that employees who live more remotely have greater absence problems? Is there evidence of linkages between absence and factors such as poor weather or other transport problems? How do employees perceive transport issues? What kinds of problems do they encounter and what impact do these have on their attendance? What practical steps could be taken to address the issues identified?

Adapted from *From Absence to Attendance*, Alastair Evans and Mike Walters, CIPD.

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How do you develop solutions to absence problems?

In practice, absence across your organisation is likely to be attributable to some mix of the factors listed in the [checklist](#). In responding to absence problems, therefore, you should adopt an approach that is:

- comprehensive – which addresses appropriately all the potential factors that appear to be potential causes of absence
- balanced – which incorporates rigorous management disciplines with practical support, where possible, to help improve attendance
- targeted – which, as well as providing consistent organisation-wide policies and practices, also addresses specific issues that may be affecting attendance in particular areas.

The ACAS advisory booklet, [Absence and Labour Turnover](#), includes a useful illustration of what such an approach might include.

[Developing an overall approach](#)

The approach needs to be underpinned by consistent policies and practices that are communicated clearly to employees and then applied rigorously and consistently. [Tool 2](#) will help you develop an absence strategy appropriate to your needs.

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Developing an overall approach

An overall approach is essential, particularly where general absence levels are high, in which case organisations may find that significant organisational or procedural changes are called for. Although some absence is outside management's control, levels of absence can be reduced when positive policies are introduced to improve working conditions and increase workers' motivation to attend work. Managers, in consultation with workers and their representatives, should try to ensure the following:

- Good physical working conditions are provided.
- Ergonomic factors are taken into account when designing workplaces.
- Health and safety standards are rigorously maintained.
- New starters, especially young people, are given sufficient training and receive particular attention during the initial period in the job.
- The prevailing ethos is one of teamwork.
- Jobs are designed so that they give motivation and provide job satisfaction. They should provide variety, discretion, responsibility, contact with other people, feedback, some challenge, and have clear goals.
- Training, career development and promotion policies, communication procedures and welfare provision are examined to see if they can be improved.
- Policies on equal opportunities and discrimination are fair and observed.
- Supervisory training is adequate, and supervisors take an interest in their workers' health and welfare.

It's wise to recognise openly that individuals have reasonable and legitimate reasons for needing to be absent from work. Also, there is increasing focus on the benefits of encouraging a good work–life balance. In April 2003, the Employment Act 2002 introduced the right for parents of young and disabled children to request a flexible working arrangement and have it seriously considered by their employer.

[Acas advice leaflet: Flexible working](#)
[CIPD Flexible working guide](#)

Management should consider:

- introducing flexible working hours, or varied working arrangements, if this could assist workers without conflicting with production or other work demands
- providing crèche facilities
- authorising reasonable absences to cover business or medical appointments that have been notified in advance, including antenatal care – all pregnant employees, regardless of service, are entitled to reasonable, paid time off for antenatal care
- allowing for authorised absence whenever appropriate to cover specific religious observances of minority groups
- allowing special leave for all workers, not only employees.

A consistent approach should be adopted, with procedures that assure all workers of fair treatment. Consideration should be given to whether any differences of treatment that may exist between different categories of worker (for example, office and works) are justified. The aim of organisational policy should be to minimise disruption to work, while at the same time treating all workers fairly and compassionately.

Source: ACAS advisory booklet: [Absence and Labour Turnover](#)

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Health and Safety Executive Booklet. [Managing sickness absence and return to work](#), Health and Safety Executive.

ACAS advisory booklet: [Absence and labour turnover](#), ACAS.

[Absence-minded: absence and labour turnover](#), 2006, CBI.

[CIPD factsheet](#)

Books

BEVAN, S., DENCH, S. and HARPER, H. (2004) *How employers manage absence*. London: Department of Trade and Industry.

EVANS, A. and WALTERS, M. (2002) *From absence to attendance*. 2nd ed. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

HM REVENUE AND CUSTOMS. (2006) [What to do if your employee is sick.](#) Employer Helpbook E14. London: HMRC.

INCOMES DATA SERVICES. (2005) *Absence management*. IDS HR Studies 810. London: IDS.

Journal articles

BEAUMONT, D. (2005) Absence-minded. *People Management*. Vol 11, No 14, 14 July. pp36–38.

EDWARDS, C. (2004) Great returns. *People Management*. Vol. 10 No 9, 6 May. pp35–36.

GRIFFITHS, J. (2005) The price is right. *People Management*. Vol 11, No 22, 10 November. pp34–35.

SILCOX, S. (2006) The ways forward for absence management. *IRS Employment Review*. No 840, 3 February. pp18–20.

SILCOX, S. (2006) Absence and attendance: the challenges for 2006/07. *IRS Employment Review*. No 848, 2 June. pp18–24.

Case studies

Examples drawn from [Health and Safety Executive research](#)

Useful links

[Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service \(ACAS\)](#)

[Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development](#)

[Health and Safety Executive](#)

[CIPD Absence management factsheet](#)

[Office of the Information Commissioner](#)

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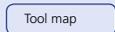
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How to use the tool

Tool map

This tool is intended to help you work systematically through absence issues in your organisation. Consider the heading questions in turn, identifying whether you have enough information to provide a clear and reliable response to each. This step-by-step approach will help you ensure that you're developing a consistent and coherent approach to monitoring absence levels and identifying the most likely causes of absence as the basis for establishing an effective absence strategy. Links throughout provide you with more detailed notes and information on related subjects.

Tool map



Use this to see an overview of the tool layout. Click on the appropriate section if you wish to go directly to an activity or diagram, or you can follow the tool through in sequence.



Where you see this symbol, hover the cursor over it for more information using your mouse.



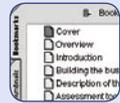
Click on these buttons (in the corner of some pages) to return to your original position in the tool or move on to the next page in a series.

Thumbnail



Accessed at the side of Acrobat's program window. Use this to view quickly the length and appearance of the tool.

Bookmark



Use this to see at a glance the different sections within the tool. Click where you wish to go with your mouse to navigate quickly within the tool.

Print



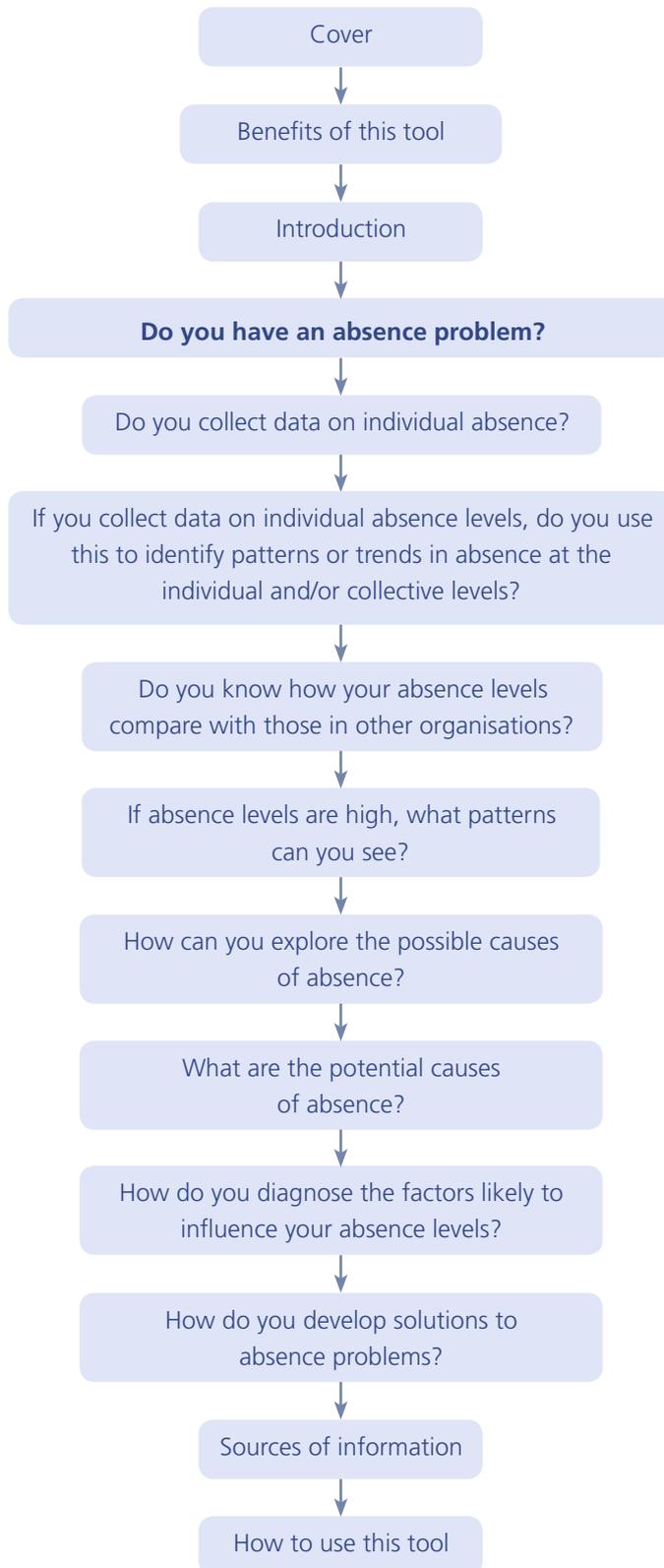
Use this facility to print the tool out (including any sections you have completed online). Please note that it is not currently possible to save your work in the tool.

Hyperlinks

[Red links](#) will link you to the CIPD website or an external website.

[Blue links](#) will link you to other areas within the tool.

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