

Missing in action



Is your business losing productivity even when your teams are on the job? Presenteeism could be a factor, and occupational therapist **Michelle Bihary** says business leaders need to create a mentally healthy workplace for all, to cut the \$34 billion presenteeism cost to our economy.

Presenteeism is lost productivity incurred when employees come to work and are not fully productive. These employees are physically present, but are not functioning at full capacity.

Presenteeism occurs when people are physically or mentally unwell or are impacted by other stressors, that take their focus and attention away from their professional responsibilities.

Employees experiencing presenteeism may have difficulty concentrating, problem solving, decision making or focusing adequately on their daily routines and tasks. It can happen to anyone, and often colleagues notice when it's happening; being distracted, hard to communicate with and pre-occupied are some of the more obvious signs.

Most of us can relate to times when we are firing on all cylinders and can get a report written in record time, and then contrast this with the times, that no matter how hard we try, we just can't focus and summon up the mental energy to get important tasks done. These experiences are generally short lived, but they become really problematic when hours and days turn into weeks, and productivity becomes seriously diminished.

HOW DOES PRESENTEEISM IMPACT YOUR WORKPLACE?

Presenteeism and absenteeism are both increasingly concerning for businesses in terms of lost productivity and workload management. Although presenteeism is harder to identify and quantify than absenteeism, research shows it has far greater impact, in workplace, business and financial terms. A recent study by the Global Corporate Challenge (GCC) and the World Health Organisation (WHO), found that absenteeism levels were less than 10 per cent of total presenteeism levels.

Understandably, organisations are increasingly concerned with the escalating cost of work cover claims. These costs are easy to identify and measure. Yet the cost of these claims is insignificant in comparison to the estimated costs of presenteeism. Australian research shows that presenteeism costs our economy in excess of \$34 billion each year.

With presenteeism, productivity may be diminished a little or quite significantly. Sometimes employees experiencing presenteeism are quite unaware of the impact this is having on their performance.



WHAT CONTRIBUTES TO PRESENTEEISM?

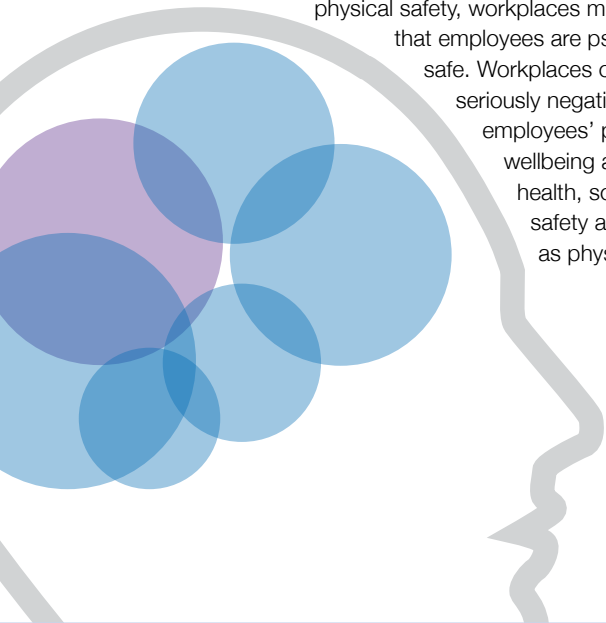
Our understanding of presenteeism is still emerging, however different factors appear to contribute, including:

- Physical illness or chronic health conditions
- Unhealthy lifestyle – such as addictions, alcohol or substance overuse
- Mental illness and/or psychological distress
- Poor work-life balance
- Significant workplace stressors – negativity, poor culture, excessive demands, unresolved conflict, difficult interpersonal relationships, bullying

PRESENTEEISM

- Emotional wear and tear factors from interpersonal work – complaint handling, direct customer service, leadership roles
 - Disengagement from work
- Organisations are increasingly aware that the workplace stressors are contributing to presenteeism.

Decades ago, workplaces became aware of their responsibility to create a physically safe environment. However, in the past decade, there has been an accelerated awareness that as well as physical safety, workplaces must also ensure that employees are psychologically safe. Workplaces can have a seriously negative impact on employees' psychological wellbeing and mental health, so psychological safety at work is as vital as physical safety.



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PRESENTEEISM AND WORKPLACE CONTRIBUTORS INTO THE FUTURE

As workplaces are increasingly grappling with presenteeism, workplace factors that might contribute or cause the problem, are under greater scrutiny.

Former Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett has weighed in on this issue and has recently called for performance bonuses of chief executives to be partially tied to the mental wellbeing of their employees. This radical proposal, which was put forward to the Business Council of Australia recently, highlights the role that business leaders can play in shaping mentally healthy workplaces.

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Presenteeism is a key business challenge and not likely to just disappear.



Michelle Bihary

Savvy leaders need to take action to create more positive and productive environments for their employees. This clearly builds better performing and more profitable businesses, while ensuring employees' wellbeing is enriched and not compromised.

SOCAP is running a series of mental health and wellbeing programs in 2017 including Mental Health Awareness for Complaint Handlers; Emotional Intelligence for Complaints; Wellbeing and Professional Resilience for Complaint Handling; and managerial and executive wellbeing programs. Visit the website for details or call 02 8095 6426 for a tailored wellbeing package for your team.

WHAT STEPS CAN MANAGERS AND ORGANISATIONS TAKE TO ADDRESS PRESENTEEISM?

AWARENESS ▶ become aware of the problem and the way it might become evident in your workplace

IDENTIFICATION ▶ getting to know the health issues impacting on the employees in your workplace, and ensure that your health and wellness programs available are a good match for those issues

EDUCATION ▶ provide health and wellness programs, training and resources that educate and assist employees to make proactive and positive choices with regards to their lifestyle, physical and mental wellbeing

PREVENTION ▶ ensure that the workplace provides employee assistance programs, encourages healthy lifestyles and balanced working hours, encourages good self-care practices and help-seeking behaviours when needed. Even a culture where people are encouraged to take their breaks away from their desks, helps with productivity and wellbeing.