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## Going through the motions

**Employees who are genuinely sick, but continue to show up for work are costing their employers almost four times more than those who stay home to recuperate.**

A new report, commissioned by health insurer Medibank Private, showed that “presenteeism” - where employees turn up to work but cannot function properly because they are ill – last year cost Australia’s economy an estimated \$25.7 billion with employers bearing the brunt of lost productivity to the tune of \$17.6 billion a year. That drop in productivity is equal to each employee missing six days of work per year.

Previous research by Medibank Private suggested absenteeism, where sick workers stay at home, cost Australian businesses about \$7 billion each year.

The research found that while 53 per cent of staff had taken at least one day off in the previous four weeks, 77 per cent said they had gone into work while suffering a health problem. Of those who had gone in to work, 88 per cent said they felt less productive and, on average, their productivity nearly halved.

The report found sick employees worked slower, needed to repeat tasks and made more mistakes than healthy colleagues and that unhealthy lifestyles, allergies and asthma, poor work-life balance and sick employees spreading infections all contributed to the problem.

“Presenteeism relates to the productivity of a worker and is a vicious cycle – if we are less productive at work, we stay up late that night to catch-up, which affects our sleep which then affects our productivity the next day”.

“The term “presenteeism” also describes those employees who attend work when they are actually unmotivated to perform and can be associated with poor working conditions

or poor management practices” said Craig McFadden, Managing Director of Savvy Human Resources, a Ballina based human resources consultancy.

“This latest research shows the direct impact on staff retention and overall business performance. Employers need to look at a range of factors that influence their employee’s health and well-being and tackle those underlying workplace issues”, Mr McFadden said.

“It can be a risk to the business if employers avoid dealing with the core causes of presenteeism and absenteeism which usually involve better employee-employer relationships and ways to handle work-load and external responsibilities”.

According to a previous survey almost half of Australian workers admitted to taking bogus sickies and many confessed they took time off to cope with demands on their life outside work. Employees with greater sick leave entitlements took more leave. “Most small business owners tend to avoid difficult conversations as they feel they don’t have the skills to manage absenteeism or haven’t collated the data to manage the problem”, Mr McFadden said.

The Medibank Private study urged employers to invest in health and wellbeing programs for employees and suggested measures as simple as offering flu vaccinations, self-assessment health tools, counselling for workers, encouraging recreational activities for employees in breaks and providing fruit as examples of measures employers could take that were a win-win for business and employees.

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